

# SUSTAINABILITY as systemic value

Unlocking systems change.

A power-proposition for  
community foundations.

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# Prologue

"We have corn grains, corn grains we have. We have corn grains, corn grains we have. We have corn grains, corn grains we have... We have corn grains..."

It's 7.30 o'clock in the morning on Christmas Eve, and I wake up in the tired shouts of a street vendor who travels slowly in his old and dirty car in his desperate attempt to sell some corn today, 24th of December 2020.

Because of this crazy and atypical COVID-19 year, we've done what we've never done before: moving to the countryside, in "no man's land village" - a place with a little over 50 houses, 100 inhabitants and 3 times more sheep, chickens and stray cats.

In the five months living here, I have become accustomed to hearing these street vendors trying to "sell cucumbers to gardeners", corn, potatoes or other surplus crop products that I never buy. Sometimes they come one after the other (up to 5 such proposals a day), at intervals of less than an hour.

I thought I got used to it, with that kind of "not seeing, not hearing" that sets in after a while. But this morning, a wave of thoughts began to run at the opposite speed to the slowness of the old car on the small rural street: What time did the poor man wake up to be here at such an early hour? How did he end up selling his goods like this? Why doesn't he associate with other corn producers and sell in bulk? When was the last time someone bought grains from him? How can I help?

An acute feeling that I have to do something clumped in my stomach. So I activated help number one: intensive Google search. I jumped on the computer and started reading everything I could find on "rural associations", "the law of agricultural cooperatives", "big grain sellers", "small farmers", "the failure of rural associations", and "bankruptcy in agriculture".

Three hours and dozens of open tabs later, I don't have any magic answers.

This poor man and others like him who are trapped in the "small farmer subsistence economy", are part of a larger story. They are "a symptom" whose reality just happened to strike me on a Christmas Eve morning.

I dedicate this paper to the rural street vendor. And although the street vendor will never read it, I know that you, the community maker, the "good doer" who reads it, are here because you care and look for change.

Welcome! This is a paper about change - the systems way - and about community (foundations). "Because changing systems takes community"<sup>1</sup>, and changing systems is what might make the difference if we want more than "bags of corn" solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://communitarians.network/>

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## IN A NUTSHELL

Often, what community makers mean by the sustainability of a community foundation (CF) refers to financial sustainability. We will not go on this path. We do this not because financial sustainability is not important, but because we build on the assumption that **financial sustainability becomes a given when the CF brings value to the ecosystem it serves.**

What is the value we bring to our communities? We think our value is related to our purpose, and our purpose has to do with our *value propositions*. CFs are *localists*<sup>2</sup> and *bridge builders*. Our field of activity is the community itself. Our roots are local, our interventions likewise. There is power in this specificity. We know the needs and resources of our communities that others may overlook. We “can build lasting bonds with community residents, better understand what works on the ground and foster a sense of ownership and pride among local residents”<sup>3</sup>. There is power also in the variety of issues we address. We are big time “doers” and have an impulse to fix things, in a multitude of community problems, from urban revitalization to vocational education. And we do what we do by constructing bridges between local players, between needs and resources, between bigger agendas and local zoom.

2020 was a year like no other. It has put us to the test more than ever. It has shed a light on great vulnerabilities and amazing resources of our organizations, communities and the world we live in. Overnight, many CFs<sup>4</sup> turned into emergency organizations (which are not by nature). They raised funds, distributed medical supplies, and activated partners from different sectors. They did what we all considered to be the priority at the time in the communities they serve. And yet, while we acknowledge the remarkable efforts of CFs, we should always have an extra eye not to fall into the trap of *ghost successes*<sup>5</sup>.

A Harvard study on nurses showed an unexpected side effect of a behavior that, at first glance, seems to be nothing but praiseworthy. These nurses who were shadowed on their daily jobs, in essence, proved to be *professional problem solvers*. “An unexpected problem popped up every 90 minutes or so, on average”. To overcome problems these nurses had to be creative, persistent and very resourceful. “They didn’t go running to the boss every time something went wrong.

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<sup>2</sup> When we say we are localists, we mean being focused on the local community, its needs and development. We don’t use the term in its political, libertarian sense.

<sup>3</sup> Crutchfield L., McLeod G. - Local Forces for Good, SSIR, Summer 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Candid and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, Philanthropy and COVID-19 in the first half of 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Heath, D., Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen, Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2020.

They worked around the problems, so they could keep serving their patients. That's what it meant to be a good nurse"<sup>6</sup>. This seems to be a commendable "how to be a valuable professional" picture, but if we look more in depth, there is more than meets the eye. These quick, creative problem solvers maintained the system in its current state, never pushing it to learn or improve in any way. This situation speaks to us in a way, about some "do good" well intended CFs. Does this story give a feeling of déjà vu to you?

Strengths have the potential to also become weaknesses if they are not wisely harnessed. For CFs this might happen if being local becomes synonymous with symptom-oriented fixes, and if building bridges is translated into practice with the transit of commissioned resources. How can we prevent our strengths from being overpowered by our "inner villains"? Metaphorically speaking, we propose two transitions:

- From localists to **systemic localists** = that means, to be local but to have a *systemic awareness*.
- And from bridge builders to **architects** = that is, *designing for impact community interventions*.

In other words, **from doing good, to doing change**. From fast downstream reactive fixes, to designing upstream interventions that facilitate a shift in the underlying system conditions that caused the problem, in the first place. This is where sustainability resides for us and our communities.

We ground our proposition in *systems thinking*<sup>7</sup>, and related concepts such as *collective impact*<sup>8</sup>, *design thinking*<sup>9</sup>, and *systemic social innovation*<sup>10</sup>. Systems thinking is not new to the philanthropic community<sup>11</sup>. Systems thinking and practice is also gaining variety and followers in nonprofit organizations. We see some sparks of systems thinking at some CFs<sup>12</sup>, and we know that there is potential for more assumed and more intentional interventions of this type.

Our communities face complex challenges. Now, more than ever, we see the systemic fragilities of our communities. In times like these, we feel there is an acute

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<sup>6</sup> Heath, D., *Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen*, Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, A., *Systems Change Through People Power*, SSIR, September, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Wang, R., Cooper, K., Shumate, M., *The Community Systems Solutions Framework*, SSIR, Winter 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Conway, R., Masters, J., Thorold J., *From Design Thinking to Systems Change - How to invest in innovation for social impact*, RSA - Action and Research Centre, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., *Collective Impact*, SSIR, Winter 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Westley, F., *Social Innovation and Resilience: How One Enhances the Other*, SSIR, Summer 2013.

<sup>12</sup> We refer here to the network of community foundations in Romania.

need for CFs to become “part of and helping to nurture an ecosystem of grantees, beneficiaries, and other funders, whose efforts, cumulatively and over time, help make progress.”<sup>13</sup> This will take “coming to understand a problem deeply, developing a thoughtful approach to address it, observing what happens, [and] changing one’s understanding based on evidence and experience”<sup>14</sup>. There might be several ways in which CFs can solve the complex problems of their communities. We don't imply that our proposition is the bulletproof, off-the-shelf solution that will save the day. This is rather an invitation to explore a perspective that in our opinion will bring us closer to our roles, closer to financial sustainability and better attuned with our current environment.

Finally, some points related to the structure of the paper. The paper has 3 parts: a soft theoretical one that looks at CFs through a systemic “lens”, an area of argumentation for making a systemic shift, and an empirical part that presents some innovative stories from the field of CFs in Romania. The writing style is intended as an easy read for those who are looking for inspiration and makes a mix & match between theory and storytelling.

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<sup>13</sup> Kramer, L., Against Big Bets, SSIR, 2017

<sup>14</sup> Kramer, L., Against Big Bets, SSIR, 2017

## —THE STORY OF PELINU STRAY CATS



Pelinu is a small village with few inhabitants and many stray cats. It doesn't take long for, say, 10 cats to overpopulate an entire village. In Pelinu the reactions to its "too many cats" problem are of two kinds: "Aunt Maria" loves cats and does everything she can to feed and protect them with her small pension. "Aunt Rodica" on the other hand, chases them whenever she sees them and considers that if no one would give food and water to the cats, they would simply disappear. These two neighbors don't talk to each other anymore because they think that the other one is wrong about the "cat issue". Other inhabitants of Pelinu take the side of either Maria or Rodica. But we won't go into too much detail about these adventures here. We will only add that "innovative" villagers from the neighboring villages, "solve" their cat problem, by transporting kittens by car to another village, and another village, and so on ... up to Pelinu and beyond.

There are many examples in which the good intentions of community members don't actually solve the bigger problem. On the contrary. Solutions such as the one "designed" by Maria or Rodica are a recipe for keeping it. Moreover, their type of intervention polarizes the community in blame games, hijacking the real chance for an optimal resolution for all involved (cats included). The reality is that finding fault is irrelevant to begin with. Trying to find someone to blame begins with the false premise that there is in fact someone or something that can be identified as the single cause for our problems and eliminated.

The alternative would be looking at the issue from a totally different perspective. Both types of neighbors from our story want to do good and take some action. However, good intentions are, unfortunately, not enough. We have here the perfect manifestation of the difference between the so-called linear solutions versus systemic solutions. Linear thinking provides a simple analysis: cats exist, breed, and multiply, ergo cats are the problem. Cause and effect. In systems thinking, finding the solution would instead begin by first trying to view the problematic situation as part of the whole community.

Let's say that one of the solutions to our problem would be the neutering of cats. Although it may not seem so at first glance, for this solution to happen in a resolute way, it will require a shift in the beliefs around authority, power, and resource

flows" (*who's doing what, why, and who has the power*). This type of shift can be a challenge in itself - especially when not all players have the same desire to get involved or have something to lose in the short term. Let's say, for example, that the mayor of the village has an interest in continuing to receive state subsidies for Pelinu's stray animals. Changing the fate of Pelinu's cats will fundamentally depend on apt facilitators who: have the right approach in understanding the problem (local systemic awareness) and the skills needed to activate the right collective solution (collaborative architecture).

We believe that Pelinu's cats and its inhabitants would have much to gain if they addressed the issue from the perspective of systems thinking. But we know that it would be too much to ask from aunt Maria and Rodica. We imagine that even if Maria and Rodica would set up their own local NGO to solve the problem of stray cats, that their solutions would replicate the linear love-hate mental model we told you about in our story. The question is: How would the story be different if the Pelinu had a community foundation?

# PROPOSITION

# 01

## The value of having a systemic awareness

There is the story of a handyman, which circulates in various forms and eloquently illustrates the value of the knowledge and proper analysis behind an action. The story goes like this: *“Nikola Tesla visited Henry Ford at his factory, to help him solve a difficult problem. Ford asked Tesla if he could help identify the problem area. Tesla walked up to a wall of boilerplate and made a small X in chalk on one of the plates. Ford was thrilled, and told him to send an invoice. The bill arrived, for \$ 10,000. Ford asked for a breakdown. Tesla sent another invoice, indicating a **\$ 1 charge for marking the wall with an X, and \$ 9,999 for knowing where to put it**<sup>15</sup>. ”*

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<sup>15</sup> Snopes Staff, The Handyman's Invoice, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/know-where-man>, 17 april 2001

Knowledge and understanding are no small things. And they're exactly where systems thinking has added value to give. On the complex terrain of an ever-changing map of our communities, understanding "the way things stand together"<sup>16</sup> is power. The problems of our communities are often complex and their solutions not straightforward. "The first step to solving an intractable social problem is to understand the system in which it sits."<sup>17</sup>

*The value of understanding* - proposition, builds on the nature of the CFs having their "ear on the ground"<sup>18</sup>. There are CFs familiar with the practice of community mapping and others for which this is just an emerging thought<sup>19</sup>. This can be a good starting point. Yet we sometimes feel that for some CFs "getting a good understanding endeavor" is seen more as something "nice to have" before doing "the real job". And not necessarily as something strategic, impact-inducing, and highly needed.

Systems thinking offers a set of tools for understanding, diagnosing and intervening on a problem and a philosophy for understanding the community ecosystem. We will not give many details about tools in this article. There are already guides that we believe do an excellent job in this regard. In the next section we will *zoom in* on the importance of *understanding our role on the map of the community system* and the *problems we venture to address*.

## Understanding our purpose in the community system

"Every single company and organization on the planet knows WHAT they do (...) Some companies and people know HOW they do WHAT they do (...) Very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do."<sup>20</sup>

What is the purpose of your CF? Why is your organization doing what it is doing? The answer to these purpose-oriented questions will fundamentally impact the value of what your organization will bring to the community-system. It is one thing to consider that a CF's purpose is to do good, it's another thing to consider that its purpose is to bring change. The answer to what we are here for in our communities

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<sup>16</sup> The word **system** comes from the Greek syntagm *sun histanai*, which refers to "the way things stand together"

<sup>17</sup> Misra, S., Maxwell, J., Three Keys to Unlocking Systems-Level Change, SSIR, 2016

<sup>18</sup> Kilmurray, A., What can community philanthropy offer a Europe of refugees?, Global Fund Community Foundations.

<sup>19</sup> Bevan, J., Resilience Rainbow: What role can Community Foundations play in increasing community resilience?, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Sinek, S., Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action, Portfolio, 2011.

is going to determine everything about us. A CF is a subsystem within the community system. A system is made of elements, interconnections between the elements, and a purpose or function. **A change in the purpose of the system, has profound effects on the system.**

While there is a plethora of differences between CFs, Dorothy Reynolds points to the common features, and draws three types of roles (or purposes) specific to a CF, respectively: **vehicle for philanthropy, grant maker and community leader.** In our understanding, these roles have a high stake and we believe that the implementation to their full potential asks for a “think like a system” mindset. Whether we're advising donors or acting as grant makers for solving community problems - understanding the system and designing for impact could be the thing that makes the difference.

Do you think your CF's roles are complex? As you reflect on the challenge, we invite you to think about what you hope to achieve in the long run and to reconnect to the broader mission that you would like to achieve. Sometimes our immediate goals as CFs are actually intermediate steps or means to something higher we want for ourselves and others. For example, mobilizing emergency funds may seem like an end goal, but is ultimately connected to the right to life and safety for all, despite adversity, scarcity, or corruption. We believe that CFs roles, put into practice at their full value, are quite complex and would greatly benefit from the use of the systemic perspective.

## Understanding our purpose in the community system

### —an example from the field

Oxygen for Timișoara - Timișoara Community Foundation (TCF)

Oxygen for Timișoara” is an emergency intervention prepared and launched at the beginning of the second wave of COVID-19. In the context of the alarming increase of the number of patients with COVID-19 in October 2020, the department chief doctor of the Infectious Diseases and Pneumology Hospital “Victor Babes” in Timișoara understood that the situation was critical and new solutions had to be developed. The goal was to provide medical treatment to the patients who were not in a serious condition, but without occupying a hospital bed, because the resources were limited and a hospital bed can save a life of a patient with a severe case of COVID-19.

TCF was co-opted in the process for its fundraising abilities. It was known that it had the experience of raising emergency funds. However, TCF didn't just raise funds. It rose up to the next level of performance and designed a collaborative mechanism between several institutional actors. As a consequence, for the first time in Romania, COVID-19 patients with mild symptoms could receive professional help at home, while the severe cases had their hospital intensive care beds secured.

For this, TCF had to resist the pressure to take on one of the long-term roles in dispatching or logistics. Probably, many others in their place would have made this more obvious downstream choice.

Instead, TCF focused on designing a functional system that was able to address the problems upfront and not run into the trouble of putting out multiple fires. "We don't want to substitute (something you do or someone else can do), we want to improve", is what the TCF team communicated to the partners during the online meetings.

It is not as if TCF was not able to perform roles of a logistical nature, roles that other institutional actors could play (perhaps even better), it is just that by dealing with the emergency calls and medical tools management during the entire pandemic would have meant blocking a small executive team from performing any other activity. TCF would not have used its potential at the maximum level and the performance of the overall system would have been weaker.

In fact, TCF even did these activities for two weeks: it took the calls from the family doctors and provided equipment to the patients' home. Everything was done by volunteers. The goals were to fine-tune the collaborative design and to build trust in the solution and in the activated network. In short, "to show that it is possible."

TCF didn't fall into the trap of "ghost success". It made what proved to be immeasurably more valuable. It identified and activated an institutional player that took over the logistics activities. It facilitated the construction of reliable bridges between players in the work to be done.

TCF is a facilitator of improved solutions. In a previous situation, TCF refused to direct funds for renovating a section of a ward in Victor Babes Hospital. That would have been a task for the Romanian authorities and the hospital management. Instead, they were content to support palliative solutions for the young patient, such as the one offered by "Little people".

# Understanding the problem

One of the top qualities of CFs is the fact that we are flexible in our interventions. We can address as facilitators a variety of topics, from education to urban revitalization. This is a source of power, but also a challenge, constantly putting us in front of choosing which type of local problems to dedicate ourselves to first.

The first step in solving a social problem is to understand the system in which it resides. "If you don't, you might find yourself investing in a solution that is ineffective, takes more time or resources to implement, or even makes a problem worse."<sup>21</sup> Seeing things in the larger map (the system), involves understanding the relationships between stakeholders (the elements), how they interact, and what influences them. The local map is made up of a multitude of community players that are connected or disconnected from each other in many ways. Responding to a challenge in the community will depend on knowing how to activate these players, in the most enabling architecture.

A useful distinction regarding types of problems is the one between *adaptive complex problems* and *technical problems*. In technical challenges the problem is clear and the answer likewise. Given enough money, a single organization can implement the technical solution (as in the case of building a new hospital for treating more patients). On the other hand, adaptive problems are not well defined, the problem is complex and different stakeholders need to be involved in order to reach a solution (this is the case with most social problems). **It is known that merely throwing money at an adaptive complex problem rarely, if ever, works<sup>22</sup>.**

With systems thinking and practice, we look at problems beyond their immediate manifestation in order to find the patterns that we can influence in a manner that leads to the enhancement of the system. In terms of attitude, this means embracing complexity and looking for systemic solutions.

There are many NGOs that position themselves (consciously or not) in the area of addressing problems with symptoms-oriented, technical solutions. Interventions such as soup kitchens, emergency shelters, or the mobilization of parents to plant trees in the school yard, are commendable but suffer from limitations if the goal is system change.

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<sup>21</sup> Misra, S., Maxwell, J., Three Keys to Unlocking Systems-Level Change, SSIR, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Heifetz, R. A., Kania, J. V., Kramer, M. R., Leading Boldly, SSIR, Winter 2004.

## A few examples

### From doing good

Food stamps

Emergency shelters

Parent involvement for planting trees in the school yard



### To doing change

Bridging among hypermarkets & local administration for "food banks"

Advocating for a living wage

Establishment of a parents' council with a saying on the school board



Changemakers Lab, ECFI 2020

## Understanding the problem —an example from the field

"Green Sibiu" - Sibiu Community Foundation (SCF)

In November 2016, the implementation of the selective waste collection system began in Sibiu, and with it, the controversies on the topic. The community was polarized on the subject, had negative biases about selective collection and a dysfunctional relationship with the stakeholders involved. A TV report taken shortly after the launch of the service shows some reactions from the community:

*"These people, they put the mixed garbage in the same trash bin!"*

*"God, with this garbage it will be... ! They told us another car is coming for the brown bins, I don't understand why?!"*

*"And what can we do, if the bins are full? Should we throw them in a pile?"*

*"Well, yes, what else should we do? "I'm not going anywhere else to throw my garbage!"*

Despite the efforts of the local administration and the private company that provided the service to inform the population on the topic and increase the adoption rate of the service, the launch of the service was not well received. As in many complex situations, those animated by the subject were looking for a culprit rather than understanding the problem and having a dialogue.

In this blame game, the population accused those in charge of providing the service with incompetence or ill will, and in turn, those in charge with managing the situation accused the population of lack of education and malevolence. The subject had a technical side and a relational one, which meant the correlated actions and mutual understanding of three players: public administration, private company, community. In this context, Sibiu Community Foundation engaged with the community and tried to better understand the problem. This resulted in several actions:

- Discussions with the main stakeholders
- Involvement of those who felt strongly against or for the topic
- Visits to the service provider
- Applying a community survey
- Three hackathons (which were intensive work sessions on this topic but also discussion contexts and "thinkathons")

Following these steps, the Sibiu Community Foundation realized that there were several problem areas:

- Lack of appropriate information on the topic
- False myths among the population related to the selective collection system
- Lack of education on green subjects
- Negative perception of citizens towards garbage, recycling, workers in the field
- Poor user experience of the service provided

Based on these findings, Sibiu Community Foundation focused its attention on facilitating the access to information on the topic. A website, a Facebook page and a mobile app have been developed, so that clear and attractive information is easy to access. These "information vehicles" were doubled by awareness and information campaigns about the selective collection system, the workers in the field, and other green related topics. In addition, in the same "green spirit", Sibiu Community Foundation used the context of a community engagement event that they organized in a neighborhood, to make urban furniture from recycled materials and to put into practice the message of recycling.

Wrap-up: The Sibiu Community Foundation took time to get more of an insightful understanding of the symptom resistance and the problem that created it. The solutions activated by SCF started with beginning a dialogue, then maintaining it, and continued with providing adequate information and step-by-step interventions carried out over a longer period of time.

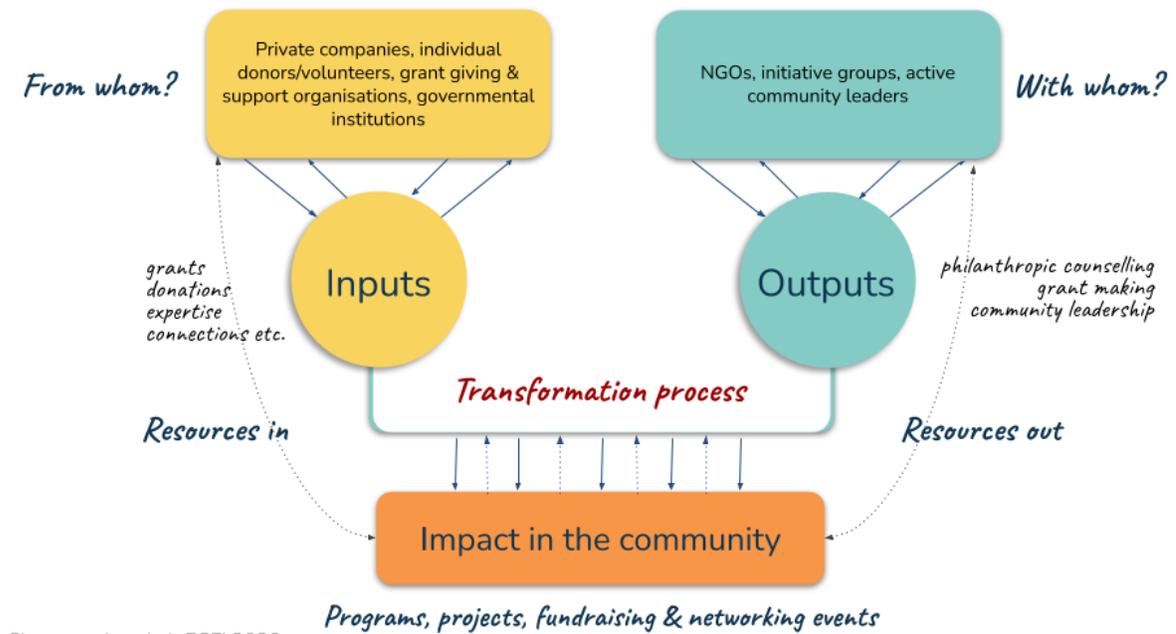
## PROPOSITION

# 02

# The value of designing for impact

Understanding a problem is certainly necessary but not enough. The design of the solution is the other side of the coin that we believe can be addressed with added value from the systemic perspective. There are issues that can be resolved through straightforward actions. But there are also many challenges that seem to be a kind of "bottomless pit" problem. These tend to be complex and dynamic challenges that have a network of interconnected elements. This type of problem isn't resolved by throwing more money or more resources at it (and we can certainly doubt there will ever be enough resources to cover all shortfalls). Thinking that "the more resources I put in, the smaller the problem will be", is the same as thinking that the solution to a flooded house is to find a bigger container with which to bail the water out, even though we haven't turned off the tap.

Merely activating resources for solving problems, although it can be a consistent effort in itself, if not married with a wisely designed intervention in the community, is a missed opportunity for creating change. We sometimes see a focus at CFs on activating resources from the community and redistributing them, and less on the design area. Let's look at a possible model that illustrates how a CF produces value by trying to solve needs and problems in the community. The model is adapted from the theory of operations management and works with three areas: *inputs, transformations and outputs.*



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A brief explanation of the above model: the inputs in a CF are donations, expertise, funds, information, volunteering, etc. These inputs go through a transformative process, through which they become an output. The transformation process is any activity or group of activities that take one or more inputs, transforms and adds value to them, and provides outputs for customers or clients<sup>23</sup> (in our case the community). Depending on the quality of the transformative process, the output is either more valuable or less valuable than the sum of the engaged parts. Basically, the transformation area is the one that is going to determine if a program, a fund or a community action will make a significant difference in the life of our community.

In general, CFs have a good track record of generating inputs. They do this through community mobilization and fundraising mechanisms, such as the donor circles,

<sup>23</sup> The Open University. Understanding Operations Management, 2011.

various philanthropic sporting events, or fundraising campaigns. In fact, in 2020, the record was completed with extraordinary success in raising emergency funds in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But we believe that the attention and effort that are usually put in the inputs, shifted the attention from the transformation and design process. In other words, **we didn't put as much focus in designing for impact as we did in being successful fundraisers.** As a consequence, the resources mobilized by the CF, most probably, did not scale equally in the output area.

We were talking at the beginning about the fact that we are proposing CFs transform from bridge builders to architects. This metaphor is not chosen by chance. Bridges are transit spaces, from one side to the other. There is value in the transit of resources, such as the activation and transit of a larger grant and its transformation into smaller grants. However, we present the following situations:

*A private donor chooses to directly donate a sum of money to an association that deals with children in vulnerable situations, rather than to create an education fund through the CF; in this way the specific NGO gets more money.*

*A potential applicant for a project call points out that he does not understand why he should apply for a grant when he could directly access the private donor to ask for a sum of money.*

*An NGO that participated with a cause in a philanthropic sporting event, chooses to activate its supporters at its own small philanthropic-sporting event in the following year.*

Examples in a similar range could continue. What we want to illustrate is that when the main value that is seen is the transit of resources, the role of the CF is more dispensable, and that there will always be possible shortcuts with a lower "toll". It is important that CFs not lose sight of the fact that **the transit of resources should be completed with another form of added value.** After the ability to have a systemic awareness, we propose as an added value the ability to design interventions for impact. We connect the design proposition with three systemic areas, which we will detail further.

# Design for addressing the underlying causes

It is one thing to make a soup-kitchen, and another to change an individual, an organization, a community. We believe CFs have an extra challenge<sup>24</sup> when delivering "services and products" that solve problems. For social-purpose organizations such as CFs, added value in solving problems should be connected to social innovation. According to Frances Westley, systemic social innovation creates a shift in the belief systems around authority, power, and resource flows. In other words, a challenge of the "rules of the game" about *who's doing what, why, and who has the power*. Any social innovation is going to challenge "the business as usual" answers to at least one of the following systemic questions :

1. *Who does what and how?* - this refers to the roles and routines; how somebody is performing in the social system day-to-day
2. *Who decides what?* - addresses authority and power roles and dynamics
3. *Who gets what?* - this is about resources (money, information, connections etc.)
4. *Who connects to whom?* - addresses groups and boundaries
5. *Why are we doing what we're doing in the first place?* - refers to the purpose and meaning of an action

This type of investigation is meant to map out the complexities of the social system at play<sup>25</sup> and it could be a light check-up tool for a CF to see if its actions are geared towards designing for impact and social innovation in a certain situation.

There is a direct link between addressing the underlying causes and the **chronology of an intervention**. Many of the interventions on complex problems are made in the light of imperative necessity, or in other words, when we can practically not stay aside. It is known that the later one intervenes in a problem-situation, the more difficult the reparative measures are, more focused on the symptoms and more expensive. This systemic chronological perspective would require us to see if the CF's actions in the community shape the environment or rather respond to what happened after the fact. And although we believe that interventions such as the collection of emergency funds during the COVID period were impressive, we emphasize that systemic interventions are not of the firefighting type but rather strategic and long-term. This is complementary to what CFs have proven to be able to do overnight, namely to become emergency organizations, and consistent with a broader perspective on the situation. Systems thinking is the way one can intervene after the moment of "extinguishing the fire" to make sure that it does not happen again.

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<sup>24</sup> Nilsson, W., Paddock, T. Social Innovation From the Inside Out, SSIR, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Bonnici, F., Nilsson, W., Parker, M., Becoming a changemaker: Introduction to Social Innovation, Coursera.

# Design for addressing the underlying causes

## —an example from the field

"An open letter" - Bucharest Community Foundation (BCF)

In December 2020, the Bucharest Community Foundation initiated an advocacy campaign aimed at the local administration. The action had an echo in the national media and is the only one of its kind in the country as far as we know. Specifically, Bucharest Community Foundation brought together 44 NGOs and strategically grouped, according to their own expertise, into 12 areas of intervention derived from the priorities of the new local administration. Then they sent an "Open Letter" to the newly elected mayor of Bucharest, in which they expressed their interest and availability to collaborate on the 12 nominated problem areas.

This type of initiative in the context of Romanian civil society and the nonprofit sector is innovative on several levels. In fact, the approach proposes a new answer to four systemic questions:

Who does what and how? Who decides what? Who gets what? Who connects to whom?

In Romania, NGOs are not necessarily seen as equal partners by the state administration (and a lot of problems derive from this misalignment). Usually the positioning is top-down, from the administration, to the nonprofit sector. Bucharest Community Foundation makes a symbolic repositioning, a shift of roles and power distribution by initiating a new perspective on collaboration and what civil society can "bring to the table". The community foundation and its NGO partners declared their power of expertise in relationship with the local administration. They positioned themselves as equal partners, backed by the power of communities. This attitude is a strategic shift from the default modus operandi in which civil society is primarily engaged for execution, while being "left out of strategic decisions".

The story from Bucharest is illustrative from two other perspectives, respectively, it tells us about how an apparently small and simple act - like sending an open letter - does not necessarily mean small impact. It also tells us about upstream thinking. The letter is a messenger for collaboration in "good times" to solve Bucharest's problems, proactively and not reactively, when the manifestation of the problem is already acute. Firefighting mode is "business as usual" most of the time, for the local administration and the NGO sector. BCF proposes a new perspective. We see this divergent, upstream thinking, both in this story and in another BCF initiative called "Bucharest Safe Fund" - a safeguard initiative, for a better prepared Bucharest in case of an earthquake.

More on how small actions can have big impacts and upstream design can be found in the: "Design with an upstream vision" section.

## Design with a collective mindset

It is illusory to imagine that solving a complex community problem can be in the hands of a single player. As we have seen, even the challenge of decreasing the number of stray cats in a small community is more complicated than it seems at first glance and requires a collaborative solution. By collaborative solution we understand "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem"<sup>26</sup>.

When it comes to collaboration, CFs have both a contextual advantage and an operational need. Because the executive teams are small and the community challenges addressed are quite different, CFs usually operate by activating different players. Moreover, sometimes CFs gain a positive reputation as network nodes, and good collaborators. This is an asset on which it can build even more. It is precisely because almost nothing relevant to the community can be addressed without collaboration, and because CFs have this nature of addressing cross-sectorial problems, that we believe CFs should be more intentional in gaining collaborative expertise. And again we see how systems thinking can bring the needed added value both to aspects of understanding the "human dynamics" within a collaborative context and to aspects of designing for impact a specific grant or fund.

According to Misra & Maxwell, having strong skills in "collaborative dynamics" can make a serious difference when dealing with defining the boundaries, engaging beneficiaries, facing challenging conversations, and deepening systems capacity beyond the leaders<sup>27</sup>.

In terms of designing for impact with a collaborative mindset, we bring to your attention the idea of "**isolated impact**" - a phenomenon that Kania & Kramer emphasized in their renowned article on collaboration<sup>28</sup>. Isolated impact is something that happens in the nonprofit sector based on the assumption that a good and impactful solution can be embodied by a single organization (the one that will win the funding) coupled with the *wishful thinking* that efficient organizations will automatically grow and multiply their effect. "Fundors search for more effective interventions as if there were a cure for failing schools that only needs to be discovered, in the way that medical cures are discovered in laboratories. As a result of this process, nearly 1.4 million nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds with each

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<sup>26</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., Collective Impact, SSIR, Winter 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Misra, S., Maxwell, J., Three Keys to Unlocking Systems-Level Change, SSIR, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., Collective Impact, SSIR, Winter 2011.

other and exponentially increasing the perceived resources required to make meaningful progress.”

Collaboration with impact is not a given. It's a muscle and it makes perfect sense to train it even more for a better response at the level of relationship dynamics. We also see many similarities between the isolated impact effect features and the assumptions on which we exercise our role as grant makers. This is why we hope that the CFs will have more awareness and intentionality about what added collaborative value could mean in our community interventions.

## Design with a collective mindset —an example from the field

Oxygen for Timișoara (an overview to the collaborative architecture)

We bring back to attention the case of "Oxygen for Timisoara". This time with the intention of telling you more about the new and empowering nature of the collaborative network that this story entailed. "Oxygen for Timișoara" is a community intervention in which an emergency fund is correlated with the instrumentation of a collaborative structure of more cross-sector institutional stakeholders, namely:

- The Infectious Diseases and Pneumology Hospital
- The City Hall
- The General Practitioners Patronate
- The Social Assistance Department of Timisoara
- Several other parties from the nonprofit and for-profit sector

Some of these stakeholders are working together for the first time. CF had a key role to play in bringing them together, building a bridge of trust between them, and finding collaborative pathways that solve a health problem in an innovative way. Consequently "Oxygen for Timisoara" positively impacts people from the whole city of Timisoara and its surroundings, and generates an unprecedented example of collaboration for the health of Timisoara residents.

The goal of the initiative is to help the overburdened hospitals and ultimately save lives. The plan is to provide optimal treatment for Covid19 patients: the mild to moderate cases receive the necessary support at home, in a time when the hospitals reach their limit. The answer of the new formed coalition was cross-sector, efficient, and just at the right time as the city encountered a severe second wave. Until February 2021, a sum of 361.500 euros has been raised, coming from private companies and hundreds of individual donors. The funds have been used for acquiring 145 oxygen concentrators, more than 500 pulse oximeters, 330 test kits and many other supplies. More than a third of the projected target was covered after only two weeks since the beginning of the project.

Even if hundreds of actions have been developed in Romania in response to the 2020 pandemic, few of them have reached the scale of impact as TFC's Oxygen for Timișoara. We believe that this is an effect of the collaborative formula enabled by bringing together key players from the governmental sector, the medical sector, the private sector and civil society.

According to Kania & Kramer, the five key conditions that the coalitions have to satisfy in order to make social impact are: common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support. Wang, Cooper and Shumate, argue that coalitions can vary with respect to the aforementioned conditions.

We believe that Oxygen for Timișoara shows in practice the features that Kania & Kramer underline. We also believe that, over time, CFs can become more and more able to satisfy the five criteria. Certainly, the relationships and experience accumulated through the years of community interventions, will also contribute to reaching this point. Last but not least, we expect that the inspiration from the stories of good practices from other community foundations, will fuel the learning process for facilitating and designing better collaborations.

## Design with an upstream vision (not necessarily big in scale)

*"But we are a small CF, from a small town. How can we have systemic impact?"* - one might wonder. Rest assured small does not necessarily mean un-systemic. In fact, from entrepreneurship to social innovations, small-scale initiatives, working their way up, are how change happens most of the time. Systemic solutions do not necessarily need to be large-scale, but they do have to be connected to larger visions.

Recent discussions among systems thinkers underline the idea that **"systemic approach is possible no matter what level of social change you are working on"**<sup>29</sup>. According to Odin Mühlenbein, small but targeted changes can be just as systemic as big ones, as long as they examine the underlying assumptions of "roles and relationships, rules and norms, flows of information, system borders, and mindsets". As Mühlenbein points out, we find a similar perspective in an article by Larry Kramer. Kramer argues for small but systemic initiatives, supported over a longer period of time rather than "big bets" initiatives that place ambitious funds on few solutions. "It is not about pushing lots of cash out the door while looking for speedy results, but about becoming part of and helping to nurture an

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<sup>29</sup> Mühlenbein, O., Systems Change—Big or Small? SSIR, Feb. 2018.

ecosystem of grantees, beneficiaries, and other funders whose efforts, cumulatively and over time, help make progress.”<sup>30</sup>

Versatile as they are, CFs can also address systemic changes both on a larger scale by activating collaborative architectures on specific issues, and also in smaller size interventions by supporting grassroots community initiatives through grants. But in the end, the choices of a CF will be related to how it will define its own success and the success of the community-ecosystem that it serves. And we hope that this will happen with a shared, transformative vision with the community we are serving, and in sync with the times in which we are living.

## PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER IN THE FORM OF A STORY OF - THE SCHOLARSHIPS FUND<sup>31</sup>

One day the board of a small CF decided to make an education fund for young high school students. The executive team quickly gathered a grant design sketch and started implementing what we will call: "Successful Youth Scholarship Fund".

The fund focused on supporting 20 young high school students in school for three years. The support involved an annual amount of money (about a minimum wage per economy for the whole year), school materials and a few hours of psychological counseling per year for young students from poor families living in remote rural areas. Donors gave a sum of money of which the CF kept a percentage and passed it onto the scholarship holders. The young people in turn brought school reports, receipts and vouchers to justify the received money. The foundation was regularly checking, scanning and filing each receipt received from students. It also gave the donors annual thank you letters and activity reports.

**The results:** During the three years, out of the 20 young people, seven dropped out of school. The problems these teenagers faced were far greater than the difference the fund made in their lives. The money was not enough to solve problems within students' families. Also, the psychological counseling sessions were not accessed, as some of these teenagers considered that going to a psychologist was something to be ashamed of or did not trust an outsider who was not part of their world. Of the remaining 12 young people, five have finished school but have no prospects for the future. Of the remaining seven, we can rightly say

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<sup>30</sup> Kramer, L., Against 'Big Bets', SSIR, Summer 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The example is formulated in the form of a story inspired by a series of features specific to an education fund called the "Scholarship Fund". This type of fund was created by several CFs a few years ago in Romania, with some variations. Also, from the beginning of its conception until now, some of these foundations have adapted the program from its original form in an improved version.

that four of them were so determined to succeed in life through school that, with or without this fund, they would have done it.

**Let's recap:** after three years of investment of time, money and hope, we have three teenagers for whom "Successful Youth Scholarship Fund" made a difference. Of these, the story says that two left their hometown to work in a foreign country, but that they send money home for the holidays. The end.

#### **What are the problems in this type of stories?**

- **The intervention design is linear and based on direct intervention:** The potential increase in impact (more teenagers kept in school) is linked to an increase in resources. Within the given design even if the CF makes an increase in resources to address the problem (poor teenagers quitting school) the effort cannot be large enough to challenge the problem itself.
- **The actors involved are kept in silo-type clustered constructions:** The program brings together the actors within the same category (beneficiaries, donors, board members etc.) for strictly operational reasons and with predetermined and assigned roles.
- **The relationships are "transactional":** Based on monetary input, receipts & thank you notes output
- **The intervention is CF centric and it doesn't built agency:** The actors involved in the process are kept dependent on resources transited through the CF.
- **A downstream intervention:** The intervention addresses symptoms – the system is kept in its initial state. The change effort is only adding some positive outcomes to the existing dynamics.

Addressing the problem of school dropout among poor teenagers in rural areas by offering money (in the form of scholarships) is a technical answer to a complex problem. This shows a poor understanding of the problem, and consequently this reverberates in the design of community intervention. The scholarship-solution is not shifting the system in which the problem manifests itself to a new state, it is only adding some positive outcomes to the existing dynamics. In other words, it offers a simple, symptom-oriented type of solution, without addressing the root causes. These features practically set the intervention for lower impact.

## WHY THIS, WHY NOW?

# 3 arguments for a systemic shift

We believe that the use of systems thinking and collective action are shifts in thinking and doing that any mature CF or with big player aspirations should consider. Next we will detail three types of work that the CF should perform, as arguments for adopting the systemic paradigm:

A labor of love - that is, change as a form of fulfilling our role as CF

A labor of wisdom - that is, change as an opportunity for our business positioning

A labor of urgency - that is, the need for change as a form of attunement and response to the "new world".

# 1. The labor of love—a matter of fulfilling our mission

We return to the idea of purpose because it is absolutely defining. If we change certain elements from the community system (the members of the executive team, the board, or volunteers), a CF will still be a CF. But if we change its reason of existence (let's say from doing change, to doing fundraising), the organization will be something else, altogether. If a frog turns to the left to catch a fly, and turns to the right to catch a fly, the conclusion is not that the purpose of the frog is to turn on one side and on the other, but to catch flies<sup>32</sup>. Likewise, the actions of a CF (fundraising, grant making, philanthropic sport events) should be put in the service of making social change and not be treated as ends in themselves.

Purpose is more than the mission statement written on the website. It's about the walk, not the talk. It's about what the organization does, not about what it says it does. And it is definitive for the value it brings to the community ecosystem. We recall that Doroty Reynolds spoke of the roles of the CFs as: **grant maker, vehicle for philanthropy, community leader**. We believe that these roles define the CF as a social infrastructure builder, as a meta-perspective and meta-intervention organization. It is said that where much has been given, much is required. Specifically, what might this mean?

We do not expect from an NGO that provides a social down-streaming service, to operate with metaperspective thinking. But we expect metaperspective and systemic understanding from a CF.

We do not expect from a small NGO dedicated to a specific local issue to do cross-sectoral philanthropic counseling, to relate to its donors as change investors, and to "beneficiaries" as change agents. But we see how this makes sense and is to be expected from a CF.

We do not expect a small local NGO, which does not have easy access to the knowledge and the skills of peers from a support network (as the CFs have at hand), to mobilize different players to address an issue. But we see the ability to work in collaborative architectures as a needed feature of a "community leader". And we also see why the "philanthropic adviser" and the "grant maker" would take upon oneself the mission of educating donors and grantees in the systemic perspective.

It is a labor of love to fulfill one's mission and to serve according to what has been given to you. Additionally, we believe that there is also a fantastic area of opportunity in this fulfillment. We will address that further.

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<sup>32</sup> Meadows, Donella. Thinking in Systems. A primer, Earthscan, 2008.

## 2. The labor of wisdom—A matter of positioning and “blue ocean” business

Beyond fulfilling our role’s mission, we believe it is business wise and strategic to position ourselves as systemic actors. The “Blue Ocean Strategy” book<sup>33</sup>, written by Chan & Mauborgne, talks about how finding and developing “blue ocean markets” is an organization’s best chance for growth and profitability. This means that instead of being in competition with other local NGOs to address some problems in the same way as them, we could rather work on uncovering and tapping into a new demand. There is a need for wisdom and impactful solutions. Who else but the CFs, who are through their DNA cross-domains and collaborators, would be better suited to start these conversations and design solutions?

There are NGOs for which systems thinking is part of their very mission. Ashoka supports change through *change makers* - that is, by carefully selected initiators who have the right mental setting to design solutions with a greater degree of change in impact and scalability. "So, for example, rather than supporting a person who is building a school (as admirable as that is), we look for people who are transforming the way children learn." It may also be revealing that Ashoka chooses to use denominations such as change makers, and not beneficiaries or grantees.

Looking at the map of the CFs in Romania, we notice that there are some examples of positioning in the blue ocean area. For example, recently the Bucharest CF chose not to invest in raising emergency funds for medical acquisitions, because this area was already served by health-oriented NGOs and other stakeholders who were active in the context of the pandemic. Consequently, CF Bucharest, designed a private grant aimed at urgent, unaddressed needs, which targeted the vulnerable and very vulnerable population in the context of the pandemic. We notice the same type of niche positioning at CF Sibiu, which in 2019 carried out a series of community organizing events, not in the central area where most of Sibiu's events take place but in a neighborhood, thus drawing attention to a new urban agenda, on belonging and “cities as home”.

We believe that this is the best time for a business repositioning. Two reasons here: gaining momentum from the perspective of reputation: in the context of the pandemic, CFs have proven more than ever their extraordinary ability to mobilize resources, raise funds and build a bond between communities.

catching the moment of a growing trend in the philanthropic sector: it seems to us that systems thinking also got the attention of big funders. For example, recently

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<sup>33</sup> Kim, C., Mauborgne, R., Blue Ocean Strategy, Harvard Business Review, 2004.

two large fund launches for systemic interventions made the "philanthropy news". With a resounding start of 500 million in grants in 2018, and 80 million in 2020, Co-Impact provides support to systemic initiatives in education, health and economic opportunities. We suspect that there is more to come on this philanthropic niche, especially in the context of the big questions that the year 2021 challenges us to ask.

### 3. The labor of urgency—A matter of answering the world to come

Our communities and organizations face complex problems, and the world we live in will not simplify. To the contrary, in 2050 it is expected that we will be over 13 billion and over one third of the global citizens will be emigrants due to climate change. Local interventions or non-interventions are interconnected beyond specific geographical territories. As leaders of our communities, we need to operate with models that take the large map into account. We have to know what the leverage points are so that we will invest our resources there where we can make "a bigger bang for the buck".

To this we add the imperative of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly. These ambitious objectives are aimed at advancing a diverse range of crucial sustainable development themes simultaneously, with systemic coverage and through an inclusive approach<sup>34</sup>. If we want to take part in this larger agenda, we will have to expand our thinking. There is a clear need and opportunity to bring the SDGs to the "local level". The donors and our communities need the guides and the translators of these objectives on the local map.

We end our argument by noticing two very interesting trends that, like the ones above, announce some opportunities and pressing needs: 2020 is the one that consecrates civil society as a place where innovation and expertise are created, like never before. Not coincidentally, however, this culmination occurs at the same time with a wave of protests from civil society against the current order (or disorder) and the shortcomings created by "business as usual". It remains to be seen if the philanthropic sector will respond accordingly, but we cannot fail to notice that there are already voices<sup>35</sup> that carry the message of the need for change and new power in the field.

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<sup>34</sup> Tulder, R. van (2018), Business & The Sustainable Development Goals, Rotterdam School of Management

<sup>35</sup> WINGSForum Virtual Summit Series, 2020

## SOME RISKS AND LIMITATIONS

Most large-scale changes are a stretch for the members of a society and will not surely and consistently make everyone happy. However, if organizations really have an attitude of systems thinkers throughout their projects, the upset should be minimal. One must be sure to apply systems thinking throughout the whole project. Systems thinking requires anticipation of how a positive action can have a negative impact in some, maybe unexpected, parts of the ecosystem and address it upfront.

Sometimes systems thinking fails because it is not applied thoroughly. For example, if the local authorities think about changing the transportation system of the city and design a more integrated version, it is still not good enough if they don't co-opt all the relevant stakeholders in their analysis, decision and implementation. The systems thinking attitude should be present at all activity levels. For example, when the local authorities from Galati worked to implement an intelligent traffic system that will make the transportation more efficient, the end result also brought upset about difficult street crossing, fines due to difficult parking conditions, traffic jams and accidents. The authorities thought that for the greater goal, some parts of the system should make personal sacrifices. However, nobody acted in advance to reach an agreement with those parts and minimize the negative effects upon them.

Rob Ricigliano<sup>36</sup>, a systems and complexity coach at The Omidyar Group, warns that systems change is difficult. It is not real change if it is seen as just another fancy feature that an organization has to acquire in order to look better. It should start with self-awareness, decision and commitment. Systems change requires a change in attitude. It is not mandatory, but it is quite necessary in order to address big challenges. Also, it has to come from within the system. It probably won't work if imposed by an authority. Members of a system can be co-opted to support systems change by commitment to changing themselves and embracing a new identity. By doing this, each organism that is part of the system can choose its own tools and its own way of aligning its specific goals with the needs and opportunities of the context.

Over-promising is not advisable. Rob Ricigliano mentions the following barriers that most systems change endeavors will meet: lack of commitment to change, staff revolt, inertia, limits of the operational capacities, insufficient understanding of complex systems, burn-out and lack of the ability to track progress and measuring effectiveness. And even if everything is right, success is not guaranteed. It is recommended to think upfront about the inherent obstacles that will emerge and plan for overcoming them.

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<sup>36</sup> Ricigliano, R., Getting Serious About the How of Systems Change, In Too Deep, Apr. 2020.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In one of his popular science books<sup>37</sup>, Malcolm Gladwell argues that we got the David and Goliath story all wrong. It is precisely due to David's apparent weaknesses that he actually has the upper hand. He is small, agile, light in armor and free of prejudices of how he should fight. Goliath on the other hand is large, heavily armored and probably has poor eyesight (a defect that is specific to those who have a surplus of growth hormone). When we look beyond the familiar, we see value and vulnerabilities in unexpected places.

2020 has been a year like no other. It has shed a light on great vulnerabilities and amazing resources of our organizations, communities and the world we live in. And, in a way, we've made what we thought to be impossible, possible. In the year of the Covid pandemic we practiced more than ever our abilities to:

- See Beyond the Familiar<sup>38</sup>
- See Different Underlying Conditions
- And see With Others

We did this forced by circumstances. How will we consolidate 2020's gains in a strategic and deliberate way? How will we liberate our imaginations to reimagine our organizations and communities? There is a journey ahead of us that calls for more Davids in Goliath battles. Will our CFs step up to the challenge?

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<sup>37</sup> Gladwell, M., David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants, Hachette Book Group, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Acharya, K., How to See What the World Is Teaching Us About COVID-19, SSIR, Aug. 2020.

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