

Exploring the contours of systems change

Weaving insights across Illuminate



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School
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Change

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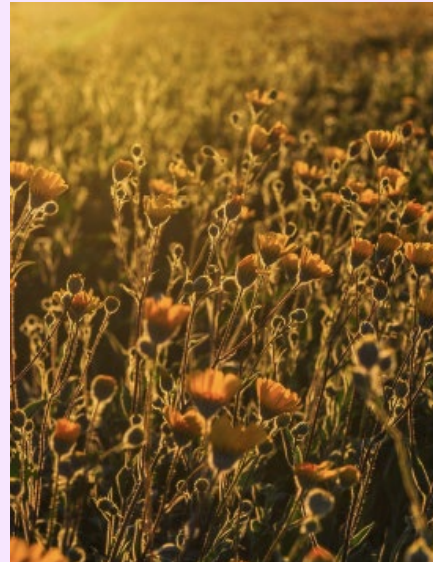
An introduction to Illuminate

Illuminate is a learning network. Our purpose is to support the field and practice of systems change through connecting practitioners, funders and leaders, sharing across the field and amplifying the learning happening at the edges of the systems change field.

All of our work is rooted in a justice and equity frame. We recognize the systems change practice has multiple lineages beyond the western academic worldview.

We have adopted a network model that connects learning across nodes. Each of these nodes is led by a collaborating partner, or a Cohort member. Rather than a top-down approach that aims to spread practices and methodologies, we believe in supporting those who are already doing the work and connecting these nodes to learn from one another, deepen and advance practice. Our model supports nodes of inquiry, Communities of Practice and action research.

Our network is a dynamic group focused on the art and craft of systems change. Our community consists of heart-led practitioners who are dedicated to positive change. Collectively they embody the next wave of practitioners emerging in systems change who align the



complex questions about the world with the deep reflective transformative possibility. They consist of systems change practitioners, facilitators, leaders from diverse practice lineages, regions of the world and contexts. Some of our practice lineages are informed by and include emergent strategy, intersectional feminist practice, regenerative practices, Indigenous worldviews, complexity theory, meditation, embodiment and ritual, healing and Inner work, systemic inquiry, movement building, and more.

The principles that underpin our work include being in service to justice and regeneration, learning through practice, connecting and amplifying, and seeking the edges of systems practice.

Background & context

This is a reflective piece authored by the Learning Weaving team at Illuminate, drawing upon the many conversations, Cohorts, and work facilitated during June and December of 2022. 'Learning Weaving' is the term Illuminate uses to share our process to capture and pollinate learning across our network. This piece is an attempt to capture the key trends, patterns, and emerging questions that have arisen within Illuminate over the past year, by gathering insights from the many nodes and synthesizing them here.

Illuminate has created a number of 'nodes' in our emerging network. These include The Luminary Fund and Cohort, the Bridging Cohort, the Funders Node, River Delta systems change practitioner community, the SIGNAL Research and Mapping the field. Our efforts have been focused on bringing together people from diverse systemic practices.

The learning weaving process is led by *Rachel Sinha* and *Tatiana Fraser*, from The Systems Sanctuary and *Anna Birney* from The School of System Change. They have worked closely alongside the Illuminate core team; *Maricela* and *Luis Alejandro Tapia*, and have been guided by the Illuminate Steward Group.



The learning weaving team designed and facilitated collective learning sessions, inquiring into what learning is at the edge of systems change work. For us this means exploring the emerging new practices, ideas, tensions that are often not at the centre of the dominant discourse. The process has included intentional tracking of learning across Illuminate activities including reading blogs and publications written by the leaders of the nodes, attending webinars, Solstice Soirees, and Clubhouse gatherings, transcribing sessions, coding key insights into themes and patterns, and making sense of the clusters that emerged. We paid close attention

to what is happening in the wider fields of change work, in order to identify patterns and make connections in our discussions.

To ensure a multiplicity of perspectives, we sought feedback from those who have participated in Illuminate. We brought back key insights to Illuminate community wide gatherings to 'ground truth' and see what reactions they sparked. We have attempted to present this piece in various voices, with an overarching sense of inquiry and exploration.

It is important to acknowledge that Rachel, Tatiana and Anna are university-educated white women, from North America and the UK, working in the systems change field, who have pulled together and synthesized these learnings. Location in the system matters, and this perspective informs the findings. We, as Illuminate, recognize that some of the reflections may be perceived as advocacy, as we aim to articulate what we collectively believe is needed in the world. We've also aimed to highlight polarities in views where they exist, as we believe in exploring and navigating these differences as a practice. Ultimately, our goal is to collectively feel our way forward in the context of what is happening in the world and in our work, and to share these insights with the wider field of practice.

Our objective here is to share our collective learning so that it might be useful to the wider field of systems change practice, as we learn together 'what next?'. This piece is organized by key themes and patterns that emerged in the collective learning sessions. We have cited quotes to bring in the powerful voices and ideas of members of the Illuminate community into this write up. We hope this gives you an insight into the richness of discussion that has taken place over the last year.

Through this piece, we hope to provide a glimpse into the vibrant community of Illuminate and to highlight our own unique positioning and contributions to the world.

The contexts we sit within

The impacts of COVID-19, social movements, ecological breakdown, and increased polarization in the zeitgeist have created significant ripples in the field of systems change. These phenomena highlight the pressing need for questions that center on systems change and encourage us to question the larger context in which we operate, as well as the worldview that drives the changes we are experiencing. It also invites us to examine how we might respond to these changes in the world.

As practitioners navigate the effects of climate breakdown and COVID-19, things that once seemed stable are now in flux. The unknown looms large, and people are grappling with dynamic and complex shifts in our world.

These are some of the dynamics and patterns that were noted across our sessions.

- There is a sense of acceleration, the world is moving fast(er)
- The systems we are a part of are failing different people in different ways.
- There are deep injustices and issues rooted in contexts and places.
- There is a need to navigate the unknown

In our conversations, some participants noted that there is a sense of urgency. In their work, others felt both a sense of people holding on tightly to what exists and a letting go. Some people are beginning to face the reality of collapse. This underscored the pressing need for action and transformation as systems leaders work towards a more just and sustainable future.

"I think what we are calling for is a paradigm shift. This is system change at every level in every sector at every point. And I think if we do not call that out, we will always be putting band aids on and so the bridge would only be a makeshift bridge" - Bridging Report

"There was a sense of collective disembodiment. People felt "something" in the air. What this was is unclear and there was discomfort with the uncertainty. This was heightened by the impact of sporadic limitations in movement, and a general awareness of mortality. An externality was an increase in magical thinking that was paradoxically accompanied by a deepening interest in the spiritual." -Bridging Report

"Things that seemed stable in our society five years ago, are no longer stable. Democracy itself, is our healthcare system actually robust. The COVID pandemic has helped us see the broken places. Black lives matter and the movement for racial equity in the last few years, stirred up a lot of organizations and policy work. Those conversations are happening at every level across the country." – River Delta

"Key organizations and institutions that have been funding systems change and teaching systems change are going through radical shifts. That is having an impact on all of us in the field in different ways." – River Delta

"The field itself is changing, the language that is used to describe this work, the priorities of practitioners and funders, and the composition of the community of practice is evolving." – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

"We were feeling a similar sense of wow, the intensity has really gone up, and it's asking more of us to hold a bigger, more powerful presence for more people, who are freaking out more." – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

"The world is grieving for what it was. Through this process, some are being stoic and others are vulnerable. However, from what I have seen, these patterns do not fall along expected lines. This moment in time forced us to confront ourselves. In my communities people showed symptoms of what would normally be called mental illness and we were forced to deal. To learn how to change the pace and thrive after prolonged periods of state regulation and social isolation for some." – Bridging Report

"People are feeling more UNCERTAINTY and AMBIGUITY at this time. What is emerging as essential now is supporting folks to tend and navigate the discomfort of this with presence, resilience, adaptive strategy, and grace". – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom



The evolution of systems practice

The work of systems change calls for both expansion and contraction, to let go of old ways and embrace new practices; including somatic, emotional, and psychological work. It involves constellating communities in new and innovative ways, through relational organizing for change.

Collectively, we are witnessing a shift away from rigid systems frameworks and towards a more fluid and process-oriented approach, which values the softer arts of change. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of care and created the conditions to open up to deepening. During the pandemic we collectively have had to surrender to chaos and crisis while managing our own mental well-being. In a world where the deep was once perceived as 'fluffy', there now is an opportunity to value this work as a critical part of systemic change.

There is a calling forth for a different type of leadership and a deepening of understanding humanity, life and care. One that can be tuned into different ways of being and knowing, and at the same time connect to questions of the political and power. One where the softer embodied practices and healing arts can be legitimized, where it may be easily dismissed in the past.

"One of the big missing pieces in systems change is attention to healing. We're not just trying to transform and change, but we're trying to heal trauma. Much of that trauma has to do with colonial culture and so that recognition at Santa Fe really lit us up and made us feel excited about the work in a way we hadn't in a long time." - River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

"Systems thinking as a practice tends to invoke stereotypes of dry and analytical maps and analytical processes. But in reality it is messy, dynamic, dialogic, and incredibly human. We know that fostering the individual and collective development of systems thinking skills is crucial for navigating our increasingly complex world - and yet how do we teach the soft skills of systems thinking, let alone leadership for systemic change? - coaching for awareness-based systems change." - Learning weaving session

“More and more the work becomes spiritual and not analytical. How are we showing up, sensing, feeling, grieving, connecting, healing, and learning to navigate the inherent discomfort of change?” – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

“The question came up. How is healing moving through the system? How is trust moving through the system? How is love and joy and restoration? How are those positive qualities moving through the system.” – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

Increased collective awareness of power and systems of inequity

Systems of inequity cut through systems change work. Justice centered and integrated practices are the deep and critical practices that are required to do systems change.

New power has disrupted traditional leadership structures, redistributed power dynamics and changed who holds the reins of strategy, and where the money flows. As a result, new voices and fresh perspectives have emerged.

“What systems get named when doing systems change work? Without naming the system you need to change. Some systems being able to maintain themselves, it’s problematic to not name the systems that need to be changed.” –Bridging Report

“We can’t build bridges without foundations... Where are we located? What is our history? We must know where we are coming from to begin this journey. We must know who we are tunneling with because we can’t see where we are going, and we need each other.” –Bridging Report

“How to incorporate racial equity into systems approaches? You have to start with the question of power. Racial injustice happens because of power dynamics and imbalances.” – Funders Node Research”

“We will continue to ask ourselves: What does it mean to center liberation in our practice? Navigating shifts in power and equitable representation in theory vs practice is not easy, as we’re learning here in this community as well. It’s all fractal!” – River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

Who identifies as a system changer?

As the field of systems change continues to evolve, there is an increasing need for fluidity and accessibility in who can identify as a system changer. This includes the recognition of various cultural contexts, systems of oppression, and levels of awareness of systemic issues in the public. The theoretical foundations and opportunities presented by the communities of practices in different areas are also crucial in shaping the roles and contexts of system changers.

With the formation of nodes and networks in different cultural contexts, there are new connections and rich opportunities for learning across differences. These networks connect systems leaders and provide a platform for the exchange of ideas and experiences. As a result, the field of systems change is becoming more diverse and inclusive, reflecting the complex and interconnected nature of the issues we face.

"People who bridge are doing systems change work, but they might not call it that." - Bridging Report

"People who are bridging and who are working from community, experience or from marginalized contexts, are systems leaders in their own right but are often not invited to ecosystem convenings and have few opportunities to share their perspectives in large systems change projects. When they do, they share that they often feel tokenized and that these initiatives are not addressing and risk perpetuating the inherent discrimination they are seeking to change." - Bridging Report

"The project I am working on is bridging at the intersection of racial justice in the US. What are you naming around who? Who gets to name what systems change is, who gets to say that 'I am a system change person', who gets to say these are the frameworks, folks that are explicitly changing systems, housing, legal, racial justice, social justice folks to have that conversation" - Bridging Report

"Do we speak the language of the dominant group, or do we use a new language? So my point here is that I think we need to call it, we need to demand, we need to change the jargon. This is my opinion, we don't use the old system, because we're always going to be caught in it in that framework. And that philosophy, words shape how we think. So if we use the same words, people will not see the new vision, they will always revert automatically, unconsciously to the old framework. So but by using new terminology, drawing new diagrams, we are forcing people to be uncomfortable, we are forcing people to think outside the box." - Bridging report

The dynamic of the funder

As many of the big players in the change field are shifting, so too are the funders of systemic change. We see that there is an increase in demand to use and support systems change, but there is insufficient allocation of resources and time to fulfill the work that is required.

On the one hand, funders are adopting complexity driven frameworks, systemic approaches, and exploring emergent, participatory ways of working. We also observe a noticeable shift in the discourse towards systems-oriented approaches. On the other hand, all of this perceived change is not necessarily having a meaningful influence on actual practice. There is a tension between the call to deepen and the demand for surface-level efforts, but resources and commitment from funders are lacking. Within this tension there is a gap in the thinking, doing and the being. Systems change is a difficult shift that requires a deeper practice beyond simply the branding, use of language, or buzzwords.

We observe a pattern of contradiction, as funders simultaneously critique the framing of systems change, claiming it to be ineffective, while also wanting to comprehend it within the old paradigms. Funders are seeking simplification and are seeking a quick solution prompting them to change their strategies and approaches. However, beneath the surface, there remains a persistent call for practices that essentially remain the same. Consequently, there is slow progress on changing deeper structures and relationships. As the world changes, funders are attempting to reposition themselves, but we still see the risk of business as usual.

Additionally, the dynamics of capitalism have a significant effect on practitioners, who constantly must recontextualize their work while communicating about their relational approach, which is best understood through experience. Building the conditions for deep relational work takes time and requires a commitment to understanding the underlying structural and power dynamics. As funding priorities shift, it is important to consider the long-term implications and invest in the necessary conditions for lasting change.

“Colonial - there’s roots of patronizing charity mindset. ‘We know what’s best because we have all the money and can hire experts with fancy resumes to tell people what they should be doing.’ - Funders Node Research

“I’m moving intuitively in an organization that doesn’t intuit much and doesn’t trust intuition. It’s a lot of work. I have to convince and persuade people to make sizable

investments. This is the challenge we have. We have to get buy-in from our organization, to do the work we want to do.”

- Funders Node Research

“They (Bridging) may be looking for systems change funding but often face barriers, lack the recognition, or access to power centers or networks to secure it.” - Bridging Report

“It takes eighteen months to two years, in many of our experiences, to lay the foundation for five to seven years of work.”- Luminary Cohort member

“People are afraid. It’s a very risk averse group of people. Not in how they earn their money, but they worry about their reputation in philanthropy.” - Funders Node research

“We are all operating in systems in the foundation we think have unhealthy power dynamics. They don’t model the change we’re trying to create. They are extractive. We are not separate from the systems we are trying to change.” - Funders Node Research

A call to deepen, as demand increases

Systems change has moved from the periphery to the mainstream of social change discourse, with demand for this work growing.

As systems change gains more attention, there is also pushback against its framing. Some see it as a colonizing force that does not fully represent the complexity of this work. Paradoxically, it feels important to codify what systems change is, to bring awareness and build capacity in systemic practices. Recognizing the diversity of approaches is valuable and acknowledging that there is not one way of defining systems change or what it means to work systemically.

If systems change leaders are able to address the contexts we’re in, there is a need to recognise and to look at the deep, long view of this work. We must also acknowledge that this work is highly relational, and requires us to grapple authentically with the injustices, tensions, and issues that arise within our current systems. With equity and justice critical components of systems change work, we must pay attention to underlying power dynamics that perpetuate and hold the current system in place.

"We do this work simply put, for the love of people and place."- Luminary Cohort member

"Centering this conversation in the margins and out of the dominant systems change frame, begs the questions: Do I have to always walk the walk and talk the talk of white, patriarchal dominant spaces in order to be taken seriously or even funded? Is it always white dominant spaces who are being spoken to and catered to since they are the ones "handing out" to those who hold intuitive knowledge that can't always be explained or broken down for white institutions to understand? Why does their understanding have to be attached to my productivity? There is so much intuitive, inherited cultural knowledge and ways of being it is felt and it is embodied."
-Bridging Report

"A Bridger is someone who has a lot of friendships. If you are trusted by people, then they will join you; if you invite something and they will want to go along. Likelihood of success is greater, as an ally and friend - especially in the circles you are hoping to influence." - Interview participant, Bridging report

Honoring the multiple lineages

The practice of systems change is diverse, not one universal thing, but a pluriverse.

"In order to effectively address the complex challenges of our time, we need to draw on all forms of wisdom and knowledge, recognizing that no one perspective is sufficient on its own. We construct our realities in multiple ways and there are a variety of approaches we might take to take steps and move forward. All perspectives are limited and all the work is contextual and influence. Friends are willing to open doors for you in certain ways and people come to you for connections to other people, as a trusted source and as someone you admire for doing thoughtful, inspiring work"- Bridging report based on our lived experience.

The origins of this work have deep Indigenous roots. It comes from the land, it comes from science and it comes from human relationships, as well as from its injustices. It also comes from a deeper calling to the practice.

By recognizing the diversity and richness of systems change, we can cultivate a more inclusive and expansive approach that reflects the complex realities of our world.

"We are very institutionalized... In systems change, we need to not forget our body is a system, a healing system. To create space to confidently say we can't go out and heal if our first field of practice isn't our heart." -The Illuminate Solstice Soiree

"An example of this is the sustainability agenda. As far as I understand it there are two stories around this i.e. there is more than enough for us all and the global system cannot continue to consume at the existing rate otherwise all will be depleted. In reality the core "resource justice and access" has never been addressed. The best example is the mythological Hydra. We cut the heads off and call it to change so another grows to distract us from the main issue... the monster is still alive." - Bridging Report

"How decolonized is the language we use? Why do you always have to adjust to the white, western, or ethnocentric community? You have to deconstruct the language and ground it, understand that perhaps the world will not change, but you can make contributions to the transformation. It is important to know the words that people are creating to describe their work and to think, or at the time of doing it?" - Bridging Report

"Simplification is a form of violence" - Learning Weaving session

"By doing the work in the roots systems; healing, grounding in our communities, what emerges is something very new" - Bridging Report

"Moving from head to whole-being ways of knowing (and not knowing!) and designing to make space for multiple ways of knowing within our work is becoming more essential." -River Delta Pearls of Wisdom

Centering the Global South

The power dynamic between the Global North and South is apparent in systems practice. Leaders from the global south feel tension due to the dominance of western constructs. As systems change evolves and meta systems (colonization, imperialism, racism) are challenged and called into question, it feels necessary to center the Global South.

In contrast to international development or scaling work out, centering the global south as leaders, sense makers, peer guides could illuminate important ways forward for the field, emphasizing the need for Bridging.

“Many times identity politics are not connected with other struggles that are lived in the South, those struggles are not claimed. In some cases, identity politics are used to advance within the capitalist model and become almost one more transaction, identifying oneself as part of a marginal space to acquire rights or benefits from the system.” – Bridging Report

“What resonates with me is the awareness of orienting to the dominant system, which is so disempowering and hard to break out of, but can also be strategic, like we have to bridge in order to stay connected to both sides.” –Women leading in the Arab world and South East Asia Deep Dive – Bridging Report

“What are the ways in which the Global South context is in relationship with the Global North? North America is consumed with itself; everything centers around this super power. The politics of organizing in the North American context lacks a recognition of the contexts beyond their own borders. If we are looking to shift harmful and violent systems from northern contexts, how might we better understand the global context of exploitation of the south and social movements leading from the south. How might systems change recenter to align and be in support of movements who are fighting for life?” –Bridging report

Care & healing

The work of systems change can be incredibly demanding, both mentally and emotionally. Burnout is prevalent.

There is a sense of frustration and isolation amongst our colleagues. The dynamics that we are navigating can be unhealthy and these waters can feel lonely and discouraging. Yet there is a strong sense of commitment and perseverance, we are doing this work as a calling and a lifelong journey. It's challenging and emotional work and can feel difficult to operate in this way. There is a sense of loss. The call for a silver bullet, knowing the answer, the justification of the work in outdated mindsets, seeking the simplification, takes away from the reality of the complexity and the work that is needed.

We heard that there is a need to collectively prioritize deep care and healing practices, addressing issues at all levels, from personal to systemic to institutional.

This means engaging with the natural world and our relationship to it, focusing on regenerative and healing practices, and putting the human experience at the center of our work. We also need to embrace imaginative and creative practices such as visual art, storytelling, and dreaming.

We recognize the need for more time and space to delve deeply into these practices, rather than focusing solely on expanding. To scale deep rather than out.



"This is the work. And the work is hard. Full bodies, wholeness, decolonizing and indigenizing is hard, bringing back the language, healing, it is exhausting. From adversity comes the learning, hard work, contradiction, what has kept me alive? Our ancestors have wires. It is exhausting." – Bridging Report

"Mental health and the capacity of people. Humans doing this work. The levels of exhaustion and not being able to rejuvenate. I wonder about the fragility of the system." – Funders Node Research

"When you change your institution and make it agile and iterative with a system's change approach, your ability to work with other people is impacted. Everyone's talking about it. It burns your team out. They can't carry the weight." – Funders Node research

"Recognition that whatever systems work we are doing is exhausting and also feeds us. But bridging is exhausting to be dealing with titles, we still have to deal with whiteness, patriarchy, capitalism... while we still have to live in the harmful systems impacts. It is also feeding us... When I'm working with my own people, is the most exhausting, but also the most powerful." – Bridging Report

Reflections on 'field building'

As self-appointed change-makers (or in the multitude of other ways we might identify), Illuminate is asking: *what is happening in the world and what does this mean for our work?* We have noticed patterns and themes across our work that have raised important questions about our approach.



How can we best serve the world and the work when the world is complex and does not fit into neat categories? Is the term "systems change" still relevant to us? These are some of the questions we are collectively asking ourselves.

Systems work is happening in pockets and there is a longing within the Illuminate community for connection, space and depth in this context of unknowing. There is a sense that remaining in community, not having the answers, knowing that naming culture is hard, that is also ok. If we focus on how we feel, how we embody the work, how it is in relationship to each other, this is what it's about.

Our next steps include taking time to reflect and evaluate the impact of our work to date. We plan to invite new members and cohort members to be a part of the stewardship group and this collaborative leadership. We have spent the last two years scaling deep through our Luminary and Bridging Inquiries and Cohort learning. In our next phase, we hope to continue to offer Luminary cohort funding to support deep inquiry. We will explore how to scale our work out through sharing what we are learning and how to scale up through our influence.

As we explore these patterns and themes, Illuminate is grappling with important questions about how we can best engage in systems change work and create meaningful impact in the world. By reflecting on these issues and embracing an intentional and relational approach to our work, we are learning year by year, what it takes to support the growing number of practitioners who are leading systems change in their many different contexts.