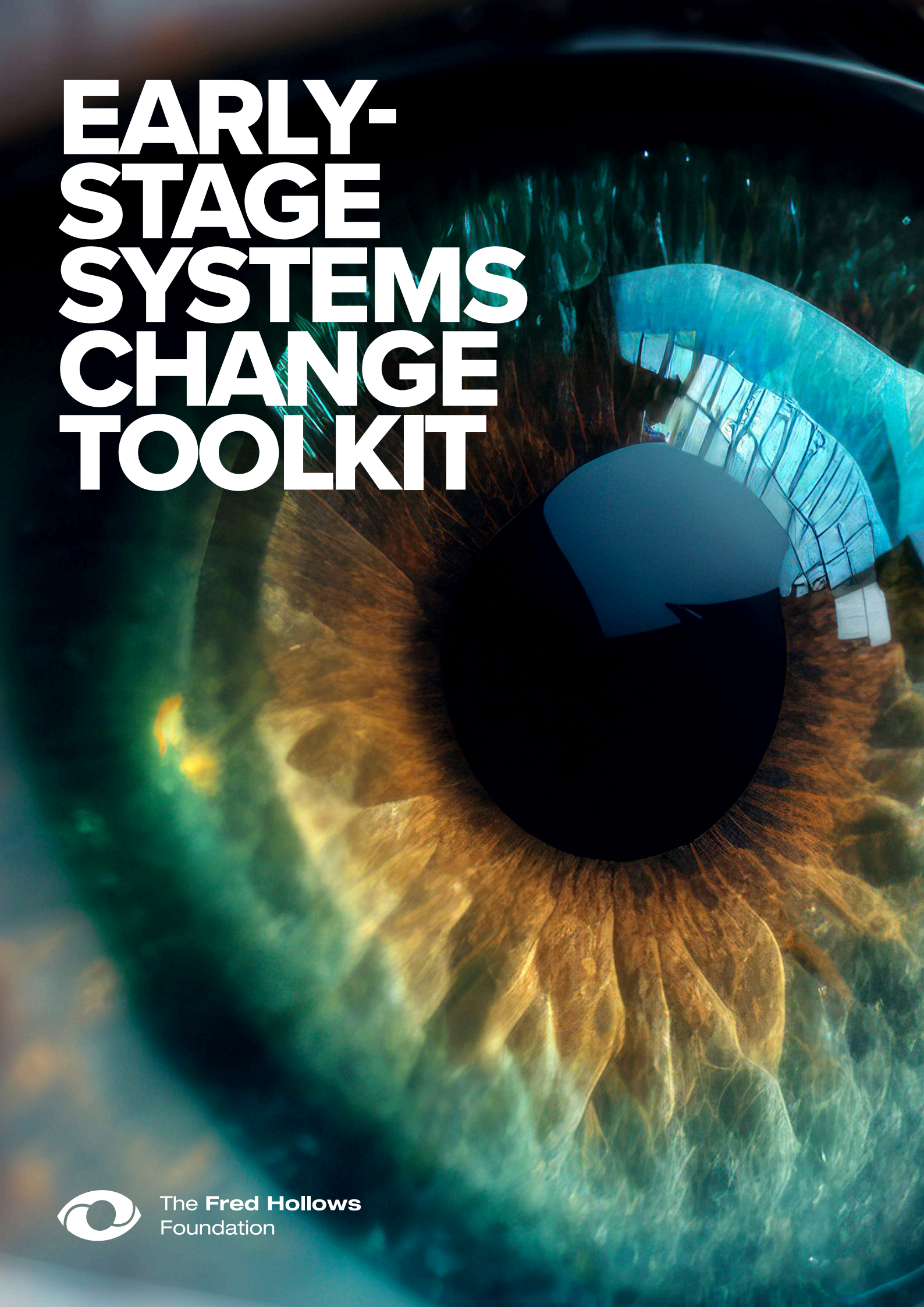
EARLY-STAGE SYSTEMS CHANGE TOOLKIT



The **Fred Hollows** Foundation

EARLY-STAGE SYSTEMS CHANGE TOOLKIT

Introduction

This toolkit is the result of work the Fred Hollows Foundation has been doing on systems leadership and systems change at both the theoretical level and in practice through an initiative in Bangladesh, with local partners. The toolkit captures learnings from the process and describes the concepts and theories and how these ideas and practices can be adapted to diverse contexts in which efforts to improve eye health are occurring. The content is not exhaustive but intended to begin discussion and co-creation of local solutions.

The toolkit is delivered as a series of modules. Four theory modules and three practice modules have been produced. Each module includes learning goals, a discussion guide and additional information and references along with a video presentation (by scanning the QR code). These modules are designed to provide practical insights and tools for those embarking on their own systems leadership journey.

Theory Modules

Introduce overarching concepts, frameworks, and theories that have directly informed this early-stage systems change initiative.

1 MODULE ONE
Complex Adaptive Systems

2 MODULE TWO
Systems Thinking & Change

3 MODULE THREE
Systems Dynamics

4 MODULE FOUR
Systems Leadership

Practice Modules

Introduce useful approaches to and considerations when applying theory to practice in public health and health promotion settings.

5 MODULE FIVE
Pitfalls & Challenges

6 MODULE SIX
Program Planning

7 MODULE SEVEN
Monitoring & Evaluation

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MODULE ONE

Complex Adaptive Systems

Why a systems-informed approach is necessary to achieve sustainable population eye health improvement

Learning Goals

1. Define Complex Adaptive Systems and why they require a systems-informed approach
2. Introduce the Cynefin Framework as a sense-making tool when navigating complexity
3. Discuss the risks when the approach to sustainable improvement does not take complexity into account

Discussion Guide

I. What different approaches to improving eye health have you seen that illustrate different concepts introduced?

   a. Examine different examples for how they exemplify the various concepts as well as potential missed opportunities to take characteristics of complex systems in to account.

   b. Explore suggestions from the group of different ways the characteristics of complex systems could be incorporated.

   c. The diversity of perspectives and approaches is a key concept to highlight rather than finding the 'best' or 'right' solutions.

II. Engage with the Cynefin framework to plan an intervention, stepping back to the problem definition from a systems approach and navigating through the various categories.

   a. Discuss the rationale for the value of the different stages to address the needs of the situation.

   b. What are different ways of making sense of the challenge and how can the complexity of the system be acknowledged and incorporated without narrowing to a specific problem or solution too quickly.

Additional information and references

Cynefin Framework (2010, July 12). Cognitive Edge. Link here.

Sullivan, T. (2011). Embracing Complexity. Harvard Business Review. Link here.

Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. Harvard Business Review.

Van Beurden, E. K., Kia, A. M., Zask, A., Dietrich, U., & Rose, L. (2013). Making sense in a complex landscape: How the Cynefin Framework from Complex Adaptive Systems Theory can inform health promotion practice. Health Promotion International, 28(1), 73–83.

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MODULE TWO

Systems Thinking & Change

How to strengthen understanding and sense-making in complexity to support sustainable change

Learning Goals

1. Define systems thinking
2. Explore how systems thinking can improve the response to improving population eye health
3. Describe systems change as it relates to sustainably improving population eye health

Discussion Guide

I. Group activity to examine current or proposed projects with a systems-informed lens.

   a. Discuss particular aspects of systems thinking and systems change concepts and how they may have been applied in this project, even if it wasn't the intention at the outset.

   b. Discuss missed opportunities and what could have been learned if a different approach was added.

   c. Encourage the discussion of 'failures' in addition to success. Emphasise that interventions are opportunities to learn about the system and discuss ways this learning can be integrated consistently to support a long-term system change goal.

Additional information and references

Badgett, A. (2022). Systems Change: Making the Aspirational Actionable. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

Jebb, S., Finegood, D., Roux, A. D., Rutter, H., Clarkson, J., Frank, J., Roos, N., Bonell, C., Michie, S., & Hawe, P. (2021). Systems-based approaches in public health: Where next?. Academy of Medical Sciences.

Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The Water of Systems Change. FSG.org.

Richmond, B. (2018). The Thinking in Systems Thinking: How Can We Make It Easier to Master. The Systems Thinker.

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MODULE THREE

Systems Dynamics

How to consistently capture and communicate ongoing learning about system interactions, dynamics, actors, and leverage points

Learning Goals

1. Overview of systems mapping and systems dynamics
2. Introduction to basic model components
3. Provide an example of how to capture hypotheses about systems dynamics to make assumptions and opportunities more explicit

Discussion Guide

I. Break into small groups to develop simple models/maps of an existing program then come together to engage with expanding this map with the entire group.

   a. Provide about 10 minutes for small groups to begin with the stocks and flows of their program, these will likely be related to the outcomes of their program. Initial dynamics that the program targets should be added to capture the theory of change or logic that drives the program or project.

   b. With the larger group these simple models can be presented then additional dynamics can be added by the entire group. Practice capturing the hypotheses about feedback loops, what information or perspectives about the system could develop this understanding, and any learning that has occurred from previous interventions that has informed this.

   c. Discussion can emphasise the mental models of individuals becoming explicit, assumptions underlying programming decisions, gaps in knowledge about the system, or other concepts that resonate with the group.

   d. Remember, there is no "right" map.

Additional information and references

Business dynamics: Systems thinking and modelling for a complex world (Eleventh reprint). (2020). McGraw Hill Education (India) Private Limited.

Donella Meadows (Director). (2016, March 4). In A World of Systems. Link here.

MIT OpenCourseWare (Director). (2021, November 17). System Dynamics: Systems Thinking and Modelling for a Complex World. Link here.

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MODULE FOUR

Systems Leadership

How to develop and identify leaders throughout the system, elevate diverse sources of expertise, and expand collaboration

Learning Goals

1. Present a definition of systems leadership that is being operationalised in this initiative
2. Discuss how this differs from other forms of leadership in important ways for systems change
3. Present core systems leadership skills individuals can exercise to support systems change efforts

Discussion Guide

I. Provide a space to practice self-reflection and practice engaging with uncertainty. This concept can be challenging as it focuses very much on individual behaviours and interactions within larger social systems and structures that differentially impact power, authority, and agency within the system.

   a. Open discussion for points of confusion about the concept and how it relates to traditional hierarchical structures or authority.

   b. Discuss ways of leading within a system in different ways as well as supporting other system leaders to achieve the goal of multicomponent interventions from different actors within a target system.

   c. Provide a space for integrating concepts from the first four modules in preparation for a transition to the final three modules that will emphasise the application of these concepts in practice.

   d. Importantly, model systems leadership concepts presented in the module, such as inclusion of multiple perspectives, humility in the exploration of the unknown, etc.

Additional information and references

Evans, D., Bolden, R., Jarvis, C., Mann, R., Patterson, M., & Thompson, E. (2021). How do you develop systems leadership in public health? Insights from a scoping study. Public Health, 196, 24–28.

Ghate, D., Lewis, J., & Welbourn, D. (2013). Systems Leadership: Exceptional leadership for exceptional times—Synthesis paper.

Leading Change Network, Ganz, M., New Organising Institute, Gibbs, P., & Sinnott, S. (2014). Organising: People, Power, Change. Link here.

Senge, P., Hamilton, H.,& Kania, J. (2015). The Dawn of System Leadership. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2015.

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MODULE FIVE

Pitfalls & Challenges

What are the anticipated barriers practitioners face when applying systems theories and how can they be anticipated and mitigated

Learning Goals

1. Identify selected challenges practitioners have faced in bridging systems theory to practice
2. Acknowledge this shared challenge and discuss potential mitigation strategies

Discussion Guide

I. Develop personal or organisational mitigation plans for challenges or fears around applying systems theories.

   a. Begin with private individual reflection about the ways this systems-informed approach is personally experienced. This is not to be shared, but to begin work with our own behaviour before stepping out to impact the actions of others. Acknowledge and reiterate that this approach is difficult and it's not a question of 'if' there will be personal challenges but what form they will take.

      i. What are your initial reactions to this approach in practice? How might these reactions present themselves in discussions, planning, or implementation of systems-informed approaches? How might these reactions support or hinder the engagement of others? What is your plan to maximise the support of others (Systems Leadership) and minimise the obstruction of efforts to transition to this approach? Who can support your personal and professional development?

   b. Discuss organisational barriers and challenges. Where might the greatest challenges exist and how can these be mitigated pro-actively? What might be early ways to gain input from diverse actors within the organisational system to inform planning?

Additional information and references

Bigland, C., Evans, D., Bolden, R., & Rae, M. (2020). Systems leadership in practice: Thematic insights from three public health case studies. BMC Public Health, 20, 1735.

Hilton, K. B., & Wageman, R. (2016). Leadership in Volunteer Multistakeholder Groups Tackling Complex Problems. In C. Peus, S. Braun, & B. Schyns (Eds.), Leadership Lessons from Compelling Contexts (1st. Edition). Emerald.

Nguyen, L. K. N., Kumar, C., Shah, M. B., Chilvers, A., Stevens, I., Hardy, R., Sarell, C. J. J., & Zimmermann, N. (2023). Civil Servant and Expert Perspectives on Drivers, Values, Challenges and Successes in Adopting Systems Thinking in Policy-Making. SYSTEMS, 11(4), 193.

Shahram, S. Z. (2023). Five ways 'health scholars' are complicit in upholding health inequities, and how to stop. International Journal for Equity in Health, 22(1), 15.

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MODULE SIX

Program Planning

What to consider when building processes to support a systems-informed approach beyond individual actors

Learning Goals

1. Review characteristics of complex systems and systems thinking that present a challenge for traditional approaches to program planning
2. Present alternative ways of approaching program planning that better align with what we know about complex public health challenges

Discussion Guide

I. Apply the concepts introduced to an existing program or intervention logic model.

   a. Discuss how these concepts are or are not captured in existing processes.

      i. How could program planning processes better incorporate the characteristics of complex systems and systems thinking?

      ii. What might be the initial steps and what might be long-term goals to maximise the sustainability of this approach within an organisation?

      iii. How can the boundaries be expanded to include more contextual factors? What opportunities are there for collaboration or additional program components that might contribute to sustainability?

II. Develop a Theory of Change using these tools.

a. What are the roles of various program components? What are the underlying hypotheses about how the system functions and why various changes are expected to influence our target outcomes?

Additional information and references

Badgett, A. (2022). Systems Change: Making the Aspirational Actionable. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

DESTA Research. (2022, May 30). Systems Theory of Change. Medium.

Hawe, P. (2015). Lessons from Complex Interventions to Improve Health. Annual Review of Public Health, 36 (Volume 36, 2015), 307–323.

Wilkinson, H., Hills, D., Penn, A., & Barbrook-Johnson, P. (2021). Building a system-based Theory of Change using Participatory Systems Mapping. Evaluation, 27(1), 80–101.

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MODULE SEVEN

Monitoring & Evaluation

Approaches to monitor and create evidence that simultaneously elevates system learning and adaptive interventions

Learning Goals

1. Present ways the unique characteristics of systems change efforts in complexity present challenges for evaluation
2. Introduce developmental evaluation as a model to address these needs
3. Present a framework for multilevel accountability through monitoring

Discussion Guide

I. Refine monitoring and evaluation processes.

a. Using the Mountain of Accountability, assess the ways your organisation currently has formal or informal ways of supporting the three levels.

b. How can the monitoring and evaluation processes be strengthened to support learning between and within levels?

c. How do concepts learned in previous modules inform how you are thinking about monitoring and evaluation? Make your mental models about how changes will impact the functioning of the system explicit in your discussions with others.

d. How can learning be consistently and intentionally built into the process to ensure this feedback from the system informs future interventions?

Additional information and references

Mountain of Accountability › Blandin Foundation. (2014, May 7). Blandin Foundation.

Patton, M. Q., McKegg, K., & Wehipeihana, N. (Eds.). (2016). Developmental evaluation exemplars: Principles in practice. The Guilford Press. (sample chapter)

Better Evaluation Resources:

Developmental Evaluation Overview

A practitioner's guide to developmental evaluation | Better Evaluation. (2010, January 3).

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