

Going Deeper:

Building a Field





Building a Field

Impact investing.

Hospice and palliative care.

Collective impact.

These are just three examples of spaces where funders have invested to build fields to drive changes in ideas and practices in a larger-scale, sustainable way.

Sometimes, field-building efforts can be conflated with social movements, something we describe more fully in the brief “Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change.” However, field building has a unique set of characteristics and a distinct theory of change that, if you are implementing, are worth doing well.

In this companion piece to the fuller brief, we seek to help foundation staff, social change leaders, and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating these efforts to gain more clarity and understanding about

what they are doing and the kind of changes they can reasonably expect in the near and long term; how their work can more consistently reflect principles of equity and apply them to advance equitable outcomes; and how to track and learn more about change. Specifically, in this piece you’ll find the following:

- + A description of field building and key assumptions
- + Some theories and frameworks that might be helpful
- + Questions to help bake principles of equity into the work
- + Key outcomes to look for
- + Insights related to tracking progress and learning along the way
- + A list of resources to learn more

Our hope is that this resource can provide a bite-sized overview and introduction to key concepts that could support more effective development and implementation of this approach that will lead to equitable impact.

In “[Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#),” we provide overviews and compare and contrast three large-scale social change approaches that we think have similarities with social movements:



Field Building



Network Development



Promoting Uptake of Practices by large numbers of organizations

We chose to focus on these approaches because we see them commonly conflated with movements. In the piece, we further detail these approaches—that is, their definitions, key theory of change, primary characteristics, outcomes, and other components, with the aim of helping foundation staff as well as social change leaders and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating social change strategies to better situate their work within these approaches where applicable. If you are unsure if you are building a field or if you want to learn more, [check out the full brief](#).



Field Building

What is it?

FIELD BUILDING:
A community of organizations and individuals (field) working together in support of a common goal by sharing ideas, research, systems, and practices.

A **field** is “a community of organizations and individuals working together to solve a common set of problems, develop a common body of theory and knowledge, or advance and apply common practices.”¹ **Field building** comprises activities aimed at developing, aligning, or expanding the work of multiple actors to advance broad outcomes in a specialized area of practice. Field-building activities can include the following:

- + Establishing common vocabulary, new shared norms and narratives, proof points, and promising practices
- + Generating a relevant body of research and evidence to clarify, guide, and support practice
- + Strengthening organizational and professional development systems
- + Fostering alignment among a wide spectrum of actors (including researchers, advocates, communications professionals, practitioners, policymakers, funders, and others)² to facilitate the shared development of norms and practices and ensure they are put into action and advanced in a complementary and coordinated way over time

A **key assumption** underlying field building as an approach to advancing social change: well-established and commonly held ideas, methods, tools, and practices are (1) regularly renewed and (2) collectively applied by a group of actors with shared identity help to create the conditions for broad and durable social impact.

Building the field of microfinance

In the early 1980s in Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank made some of its first small loans to the rural poor, a group that had been excluded from traditional banking and was widely considered uncreditworthy. By the mid-2000s, microfinance was a leading idea in international development, implemented all over the world, and its originator, Mohammed Yunus, had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Growth in microfinance was the result of decades of field building, with a handful of early adopting foundations making critical investments, not just via grants to microfinance organizations themselves but also by supporting the development of infrastructure, building institutions, and diffusing ideas. Over this time, foundations were engaged in a number of activities, including strengthening and expanding the activities of microfinance organizations, incentivizing new investments, supporting training for NGO staff and members of beneficiary communities, funding academic research, and—particularly as uptake increased and significant challenges, such as recurrent indebtedness, emerged—working to identify and promote best practices. Now, microfinance is part of the financial and development mainstream and remains a diverse and evolving field.

What are key concepts and useful frameworks?

Understanding the status of a field’s development—its core components and stage of evolution—can help you pinpoint where to focus activities and resources. We have found two frameworks helpful for describing fields and their potential to drive social change. The first identifies **core elements of a mature field**, and the second describes **how fields develop and change over time**.

In recent a recent report, *Field Building for Population Level Change*, the Bridgespan Group identifies five observable characteristics that form the foundation of fields: knowledge base, actors, field-level agenda, infrastructure, and resources. The table below describes the characteristics of a mature field, which would enable the advancement of broad social change goals.

Table 1 – Characteristics of Fields³

Characteristic	Description and Purpose	A Mature Field Has...
Knowledge base	An evolving body of academic and practical research that helps actors better understand the magnitude of the issues at hand and identifies and analyzes shared barriers. The knowledge base provides the data and information needed to design, implement, and adapt effective approaches and serves as a common reference point for the field’s actors, helping to harmonize their efforts.	A robust and evolving knowledge base
Actors	Individuals and organizations that together help the field develop the shared identity and vision that are required to achieve impact at scale, with leadership from and authentic engagement with actors “closest to the ground” to provide a distinct and necessary vantage point on the problem and its potential solutions.	A heterogeneous yet complementary set of actors with a shared identity
Field-level agenda	The most critical approaches that field actors will pursue to address barriers and develop adaptive solutions. These approaches are varied yet complementary and bound by an overarching strategy that the field’s actors co-create to guide progress.	A clear yet dynamic field-level agenda
Infrastructure	The “connective tissue” that strengthens each of the other four field characteristics as well as the complementarity between them, enhancing the efforts of actors in the field by making them more coordinated, connected, and effective. Infrastructure supports a range of activities including building knowledge, providing technical assistance to organizations, hosting convenings, and pooling funds.	Adaptive infrastructure
Resources	Financial capital or nonfinancial support, such as facilitating introductions between funders and organizations, that support the organizations doing the work and engender conditions for them to be most effective.	Sustainable and sufficient resources

Source: The Bridgespan Group. (2020). *Field Building for Population Level Change*

This builds on earlier work carried out by the Bridgespan Group for the James Irvine Foundation, [the Strong Field Framework](#), which also lays out a set of field components that characterize strong fields and that may be of interest to practitioners engaged in this work.⁴

The Innovation Network for Communities describes several stages of field

development over time. This framework implies that fields that are further evolved—that is, fields that reflect the “standardization” stage of practice highlighted in the table below—reflect an ecology that is more conducive to innovation and therefore have greater potential to drive social change.⁵

Table 2 – The Evolution of a Field of Practice⁶

Stage	Characteristics
Framing	Conceptual framing and isolated practice examples.
Networking	Networking of innovators and the proliferation of practices. Practices are fragmented and often considered proprietary.
Maturation	Maturation of practices. Convergence around common methods and tools. Integration of previously differentiated practices. Development of a professional implementation support network.
Standardization	Practices become highly standardized and incorporated into formal training, credentialing, and certification systems. Practices are considered “commodities.” Reward systems reinforce desired behaviors.

Source: Innovation Network for Communities. (2009). *Fields, Innovations and Places: Three Different Strategies for Social Innovators*.

How can this approach advance equity?

Supporting fields, especially nascent ones, provides an opportunity to ensure equitable principles, diversity, and inclusion are baked into the foundation of the field. The following questions provide some entry points for considering diversity, inclusion, and equity within key field components:

- + Who has a seat at the table? Who doesn't, and why? In what ways can the people who are supposed to benefit from the field contribute to its development, values, and principles?
- + Who is defining the identity of a field and its standards of quality? To what extent have race or other issues of privilege or oppression been wrestled with and included?
- + Who's being funded for research? Are you supporting diverse researchers and a range of institutions? Is research that is funded building in considerations of equity and privilege?
- + What types of organizations are getting access to professional development? Do some organizations need additional supports/capacities to participate fully and reach those who are traditionally and historically oppressed?
- + Do products, trainings materials, and so forth, explicitly address issues of race and equity?

Field building could be implemented as a singular approach or in combination with other approaches or strategies aimed at social impact. To learn more about how social change efforts may overlap or be mutually reinforcing, [Check out the full brief](#).

- + How do funding streams promote equity or maintain inequitable systems?

What are key outcomes to look for?

The most near-term changes resulting from field-building efforts are likely to occur among field actors, such as changes in their knowledge, tools, skills, relationships, and practices. Longer-term

changes may include changes across a field and systems-level changes. The table below identifies outcomes that may be relevant to fields at different stages of the work.

Table 3 – Example Outcomes of Field-Building Efforts

Shorter-Term	Longer-Term
<p>Changes among field actors (includes individuals, groups, or organizations)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater awareness of and access to relevant data and research • Increased technical skills • Increased commitment to do/sustain what’s needed to ensure the strength of a field <p>Greater agreement among field actors regarding a shared agenda and goals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased coordination and alignment—for example, regular and/or strategic information sharing among field actors, cross-fertilization of field actors’ insights and knowledge, aligned/mutually reinforcing actions or practices across actors in the field • Increased number and diversity of stakeholders who participate in or contribute to the field, including those affected by the field’s issue(s) • Increased utility of the knowledge base • Established field leadership that includes representation of communities most affected by issue 	<p>Field-level changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms, standards, and practices are increasingly adopted, upheld, and adapted by relevant actors/sectors • Increased/maintained nimbleness of a field to usefully evolve and adapt over time • Enhanced/maintained field support structures—for example, information clearinghouses, professional development organizations • Increased effectiveness of a field in advancing ultimate aims <p>Systems-level changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption/implementation of policies that support a field’s operating environment • Sustained public/private supports that ensure the field’s ongoing strength and the effectiveness of a field—for example, resource commitments, defenders/champions

Tracking Progress and Learning along the Way

Trying to measure the state and progress of field-building efforts is not straightforward. We want to share a few insights we have gained in the past that may help others more effectively and

efficiently undertake this work and build upon the practices that exist currently.⁷

Make clear “boundary” determinations.

To effectively measure the state of outcomes and to measure for change over time, you need to develop and

clearly document a firm understanding of boundaries within which you think the field will be operating. Boundary considerations include the type of actors involved (e.g., who should see themselves as part of the field) as well as geography or jurisdiction (e.g., a region, a county, or a state). For example, in [determining the state of the feedback field](#), we chose to limit the field to the United States and excluded the range of feedback practitioners from the assessment. We made clear the criteria used to determine the sample of key informants so that, even when the field makeup and size change over time, we could repeat the methodology at a later time. This matters because it determines the following:

- + Who we expect to experience short-term outcomes (e.g., changes in awareness, skills, commitment).
- + How to understand change over time: if you are able to keep boundary decisions clear, you will be better able to understand the degree to which there are more actors who see themselves in a field, or you can determine if a field expanded scopes in ways that went beyond initial boundaries.

Understanding changes in fields relates to levels of maturity. Early frameworks around fields helped codify the core elements of a field but lent themselves more to a way to describe the state of these elements without

clearly articulating how the status of an element aligned to a state of maturity. In other words, knowing the state of the elements of the strong field didn't necessarily tell you if a field or element of the field was nascent or mature in a consistent or systematic way. Evaluators and funders will benefit from ongoing work in this area to more fully flesh out ways to assess the state of fields, in whole or parts, against rubrics or tools that are sensitive enough to detect change over time and robust enough to be useful for a variety of field efforts.

Be creative with mixed methods.

While many aspects of field development and early outcomes rely on the perceptions of those in the field (e.g., increased awareness, commitment, and agreement), we encourage creativity in using a range of methods to determine the state of the field beyond individual perceptions. Social network analysis, for example, can help robustly track changes in coordination and connection over time. Media analysis and other content analysis approaches can help test alignment of materials, principles, research, and communications associated with field actors. Also, consider ways you can be sure you haven't made boundaries too narrow by including snowball sampling or a set of useful bellwether informants to augment your planned activities⁸

Where can I learn more and go deeper?

This short brief can only give the smallest taste of the wealth of information that exists that can inform strategy and measurement decisions. Below we provide links to some of the materials we referenced and

found most helpful so that you can dig deeper into the frameworks and ideas that will best support your own thinking and processes.

- Bernholz, L., Seale, S. L., & Wang, T. (2009). [Building to Last: Field Building as a Philanthropic Strategy](#).
- The Bridgespan Group. (2020). [Field Building for Population-Level Change: How funders and practitioners can increase the odds of success](#).
- The James Irvine Foundation & The Bridgespan Group. (2009). [The Strong Field Framework](#).
- Kovich, D. (2005). [The Hewlett Foundation's Conflict Resolution Program: Twenty Years of Field-Building 1984–2004](#).
- Petrovich, J. (2011). [Exiting Responsibly: Best Donor Practices in Ending Field Support](#).
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2011). [Improving Care at the End of Life: How the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Its Grantees Built the Field](#).
- Spark Policy Institute. (2017). [What It Takes to Build or Bend a Field of Practice](#).

Endnotes

- ¹ O'Neil, K. (2015, November 18). *How do you build a field? Lessons from public health*. Rockefeller Foundation. <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/how-do-you-build-a-field-lessons-from-public-health/>
- ² Petrovich, J. (2011). *Exiting responsibly: Best donor practices in ending field support*. A study for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. <https://www.rf.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/RWJ%20Report%20-%20Exiting%20Responsibly%20-%20Best%20Donor%20Practices%20in%20Ending%20Field%20Support.pdf>
- ³ The Bridgespan Group. (2020). *Field building for population level change*. <https://www.bridgespan.org/bridgespan/Images/articles/field-building-for-population-level-change/field-building-for-population-level-change-march-2020.pdf>
- ⁴ The Bridgespan Group. (2009). *The strong field framework*. <https://irvine-dot-org.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/64/attachments/strongfieldframework.pdf?1412656138>
- ⁵ In their [recent piece on field building](#), referenced above, the Bridgespan Group also identifies three distinct phases of field progression: Emerging Phase, in which impact is scattered and sporadic; Forming Phase, in which impact happens more consistently due to stronger infrastructure, coordination, and collaboration; and Evolving and Sustaining Phase, in which impact accelerates even further and can be achieved at scale.
- ⁶ Innovation Network for Communities. (2009). *Fields, innovations and places: Three different strategies for social innovators*. <https://www.slideshare.net/johncleveland/fields-innovation-places>
- ⁷ Check out the brief, [Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#) for considerations about how to effectively track progress and learn along the way when you are implementing social change approaches in dynamic environments more broadly.
- ⁸ In the field assessment referred to above, we documented a number of our methodological steps and choices in Appendix B that could be helpful as examples.