# TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE CONCEPTS

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE LEARNING BRIEF - SEPTEMBER 2021

CIF
CLIMATE INVESTMENT FUNDS

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief was sponsored by the Climate Investment Funds' (CIF) Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP) and prepared by the TCLP consultant team, including Melissa Bañales, Nandini Chaturvedula, Sarah Abramowitz, Shelby Thomas, and Tim Larson from Ross Strategic; Nacibe Chemor; and Carolina Agurto, José Pablo Brown, and Maria José Vallejo from C-230 Consultores. Many people contributed to the preparation of this brief, including the following Climate Investment Funds Evaluation & Learning Initiative team members: Anna Williams, Eirini Pitta, Joseph Dickman, Mike Ward, and Regan Smurthwaite.

The updated transformational change concepts presented in this document are built on the concepts initially developed by the CIF TCLP during its first two years (2017–2019). Throughout this period, it examined the concept of transformational change, CIF's role in contributing to it, and how climate finance could be more transformational. In 2020 and early 2021, the TCLP engaged participants from across the globe in four Interest Groups that focus on transformational change in specific areas: Clean Energy and Energy Transition; Resilience and Adaptation; Landscapes, Forests, and Agriculture; and Transformational Change Concepts, Methods, and Metrics (CMM). Many TCLP participants contributed to the updated concepts—particularly the CMM Interest Group participants who began discussing the updates in early 2020. Within the CMM Interest Group, a small group of participants from the Dimensions Work Group contributed to several additional rounds of revisions, including Flavia Witkowski Frangetto, Jessica Kyle, Jon Prettyman, Jonny Morell, Matthew Savage, Neil Bird, Rob D. van den Berg, Steve Waddell, Susannah Fisher, and Zenda Ofir. The CIF TCLP is grateful to everyone who helped in developing a more nuanced definition and dimensions of transformational change captured in this document.



Please send any questions or comments about this study to the CIF Transformational Change Learning Partnership Team (CIFtclp@worldbank.org).

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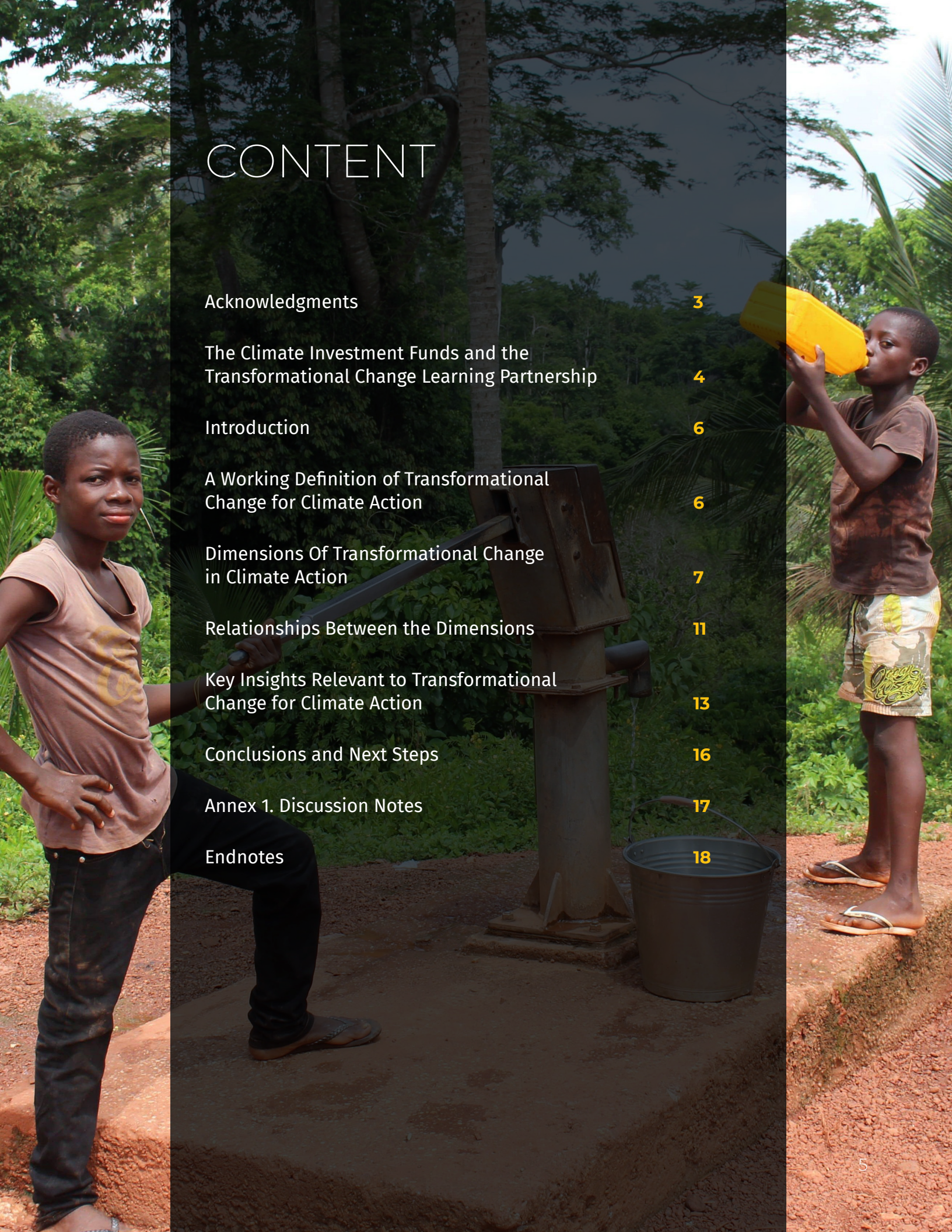
# THE CLIMATE INVESTMENT FUNDS AND THE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

The Climate Investment Funds (CIF) were established in 2008 to mobilize resources and trigger investments for low carbon, climate resilient development in select middle income and developing countries. To date, 14 contributor countries have pledged over US$8.5 billion to the CIF, which is expected to leverage an additional US$61 billion in co-financing for mitigation and adaptation interventions at an unprecedented scale in 72 recipient countries. CIF's large-scale, low-cost, long-term financing lowers the risk and cost of climate financing. It tests new business models, builds track records in unproven markets, and boosts investor confidence to unlock additional sources of finance.

CIF's Evaluation and Learning Initiative established the Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP) in 2017 to facilitate a collaborative, evidence-based learning process on transformational change and CIF's role in supporting transformational change since 2008.



# CONTENT

# INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes the latest understanding of the transformational change concepts originally developed by the Climate Investment Funds' (CIF) Transformational Change Learning Partnership (TCLP) in 2017. Revisions to the concepts were developed based on input from the TCLP in late 2020 and early 2021. Brief commentaries, included in Annex 1, highlight the key areas of discussion by the TCLP which inform these updates.

# A WORKING DEFINITION OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Broadly defined, transformational change is a *deep and fundamental change in a system's form, function, or processes*. The concept of transformational change is agnostic to normative goals or values, and transformational changes can have both positive and negative impacts. In the context of the climate crisis, addressing climate change requires transformation. Many social, economic, and technical systems need to rapidly change in profound ways to achieve net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, enhance resilience and adaptation to climate change, and reduce stress on natural systems. The transformations required to address the climate crisis are infused with direction. The TCLP has developed the following working definition of transformational change for climate action:

> **Fundamental change in systems relevant to climate action, with large-scale positive impacts that shift and accelerate the trajectory of progress towards climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development pathways.**[1]
> (see Annex 1.)

*Climate action* refers to efforts to mitigate climate change and enhance resilience and adaptation to climate change impacts. Strategic interventions can contribute to transformational change for climate action by addressing contextually relevant enabling conditions and systemic barriers; supporting scaling pathways; speeding progress; and fostering the robustness and resilience of changes and the systems supporting them. Through attentiveness to transformational change concepts, the design and implementation of interventions can enhance their potential contributions to the transformations needed for climate action.

# DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN CLIMATE ACTION

Transformational change dimensions are attributes of change in systems for addressing climate change. The five dimensions—Relevance, Systemic Change, Speed, Scale, and Adaptive Sustainability[2]—vary in emphasis and significance based on context and timing, but all must be attended to, or present, to some extent for there to be confidence that climate actions are transformational (see Figure 1).

## RELEVANCE

***Alignment with context and opportunities to advance transformational change goals***

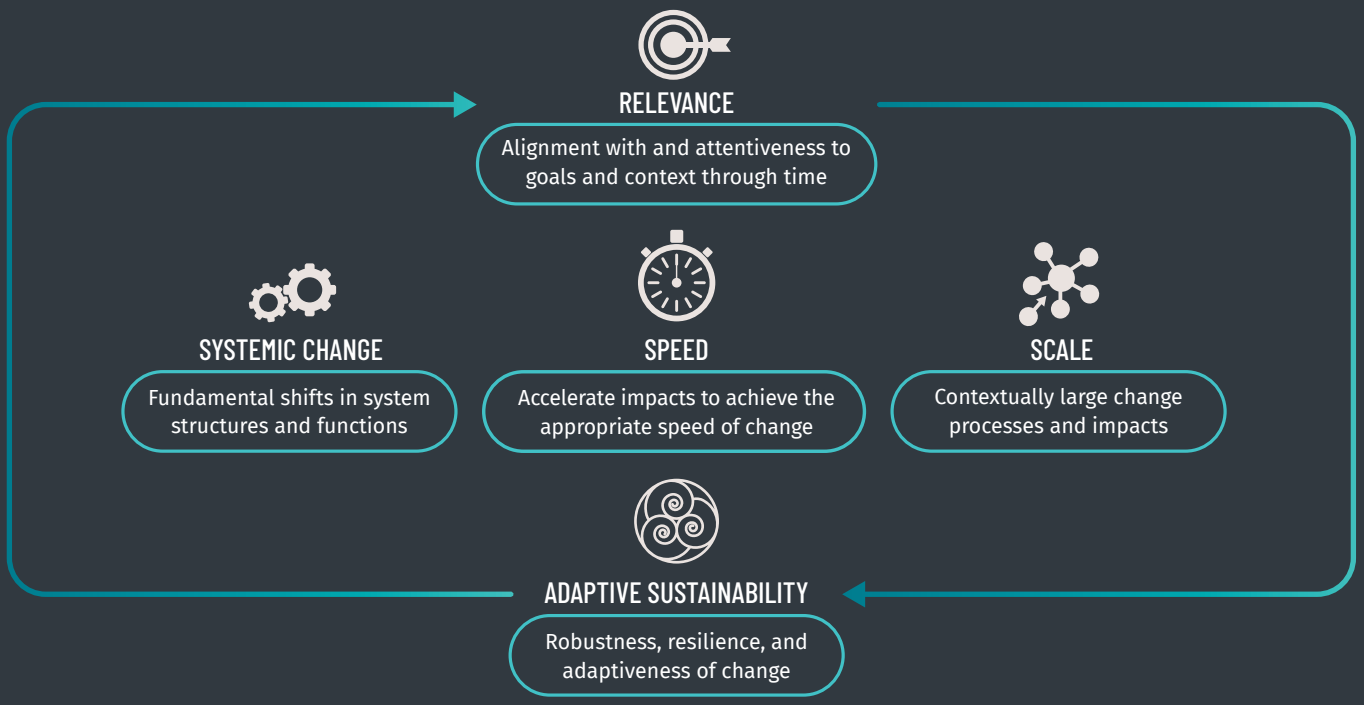
(see Annex 1.)

Relevance is an action-oriented framing dimension that illuminates the ongoing, dynamic relationship between desired goals, context, and opportunity. At the systems level, change can be assessed for its relevance or alignment to key goals (signaling "where we need to go") and processes (signaling "who needs to be involved").

In the context of climate action interventions, relevance brings attention to "walking the right path" and ensuring the path is sound over time. Thus, relevance involves the consideration of whether interventions have the right focus, framing, venues, and timing to contribute to transformations, given what is known and understood about targeted systems. In this context, risk, innovation, and ambition are often inherently relevant to enabling transformational change.

Changes relevant for transformation ideally—and often out of necessity—also advance critical social, economic, and environmental values, ambitions, and outcomes, such as equity and inclusion, just transitions, sustainable development, and biodiversity. At a minimum, relevance in the context of climate change should avoid or mitigate adverse environmental, social, or economic consequences that undermine sustainability. Changes relevant for transformation at the macro level are also aligned to create the contextually appropriate enabling

FIGURE 1: FIVE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE




conditions needed to remove barriers (e.g., weak institutional capacity or limited financing) that prevent shifts in desired directions.

Ensuring the ongoing relevance of climate action over time is critical. This need for continued adaptiveness and relevance means letting go of approaches that are no longer as relevant, and embracing the innovation and experimentation needed in emerging areas despite risks. Changes should not be sustained, even if they have resulted in progress, if they are not the strongest option, are diverting scarce resources from more promising opportunities, or are slowing down or preventing progress toward ultimate goals.

## SYSTEMIC CHANGE

***Fundamental shifts in system structures and functions.***

Systemic changes involve shifting the structures, functions, and interrelationships of the elements within the systems that produce or shape the outputs and outcomes relevant to climate action. Systemic changes provide the enabling conditions for transformations in key economic, social, governance, and technological systems by removing entrenched barriers, opening new opportunities or pathways, and shifting power dynamics.

In the context of climate action, systemic changes needed to advance transformational change are likely to fall within areas such as governance, institutional capacity, policies, financing, technologies, market infrastructure, ecosystems, information and knowledge, and practices and mindsets.[3]

Systemic change is not synonymous with scale, as a program or policy can scale, but fail to trigger systems-level changes in the structures or functions that can support a new equilibrium and sustained progress. Systemic changes are also not necessarily transformational by themselves. For example, changes in technology, policy, or institutional capacity may be important building blocks for transformation but may have limited impact in isolation. Sequenced combinations of systemic changes are generally needed to create the enabling conditions for transformational change.

## SPEED

***Accelerate or decelerate impacts to achieve the appropriate speed of change.***

(see Annex 1.)

The urgency of the climate crisis necessitates the consideration of acceleration and speed of change. The continued increases in global GHG emissions and temperatures, the rapidly intensifying adverse impacts of climate change, and the closing window of time to meet the Paris Agreement commitments all point to the urgency for action and progress. The speed of change is typically affected by the alignment of systemic changes, scaling pathways, and shifts in other related social, economic, and environmental systems.

In the context of interventions, climate action can be designed to accelerate or decelerate transformational processes and the realization of desired impacts. The importance of speed should not be construed as a call to rush the implementation of interventions that may take time to achieve outcomes or require specific timings to capture the windows of opportunity. While the high ambition for rapid change can be compelling and useful, the depth and sustainability of changes require time in order for sufficient systemic changes and/or scaling to occur and set in so that they are not fleeting or superficial.

## SCALE

***Contextually large transformational change processes and impacts.***

Scale involves expansion within and across levels—scaling up, out, or down at increasing magnitudes. In some cases, scale expansion begins small or local—at the individual, household, organizational/institutional, community, or sub-sector levels—and builds up and out over time, as the decisions, actions, or adoption of practices or technologies diffuse. In other cases, scale may start at higher levels and have impacts at other levels, such as through large-scale nationally determined contributions and investments in change, which cascade down to the lower levels.

These interconnected systems demonstrate the need for planning and acting locally, with the global context in mind. Given the magnitude of the climate crisis, the overall size and depth of change (e.g., small and large scales) matter. Ultimately, higher scales of expansion, adoption, or diffusion of climate actions (including the possibility of scaling down or getting smaller) are necessary to achieve the levels of GHG mitigation and resilience progress needed to address the climate crisis.

In the context of climate action interventions, there may be a variety of pathways for scaling change. These scaling pathways often involve systemic changes that create a new equilibrium or a "new normal" for behaviors, decisions, and actions to enable replication or expansion. Achieving scale is often beyond the power or control of specific interventions or programs, for it requires expanding beyond geographic, political, or other boundaries targeted by specific interventions.

## ADAPTIVE SUSTAINABILITY

***Robustness, resilience, and adaptiveness of change.***

(see Annex 1.)

Sustainable transformational change relevant to climate action is robust, resilient, and lasting—not fleeting, reliant on external dependencies, or unable to withstand pressures and emerging challenges. In this context, transformational change leads to a new equilibrium or a "new normal" in systems to advance climate action progress. However, sustainability also requires adaptiveness amidst evolving contexts and the dynamic integration of social, economic, and environmental factors. Adaptive sustainability recognizes the importance for people, systems, and change processes to have the capacity to be responsive to changing circumstances and evolving needs over time.[4]

In the context of interventions, attentiveness to adaptive sustainability emphasizes the robustness of change by ensuring that change is relevant, deep, and sustainable without long-term external supports or subsidies. The stability of new equilibriums achieved can vary substantially depending on the context, which can affect the extent to which changes can endure. Adaptive Sustainability also requires the ability to learn in ways that enhance responsiveness to changing circumstances and evolving needs over time. It may necessitate stopping or shifting activities in tandem with the evolving circumstances, the understanding of unintended consequences, or the emergence of new breakthroughs that render some changes obsolete or inferior.

# RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE DIMENSIONS

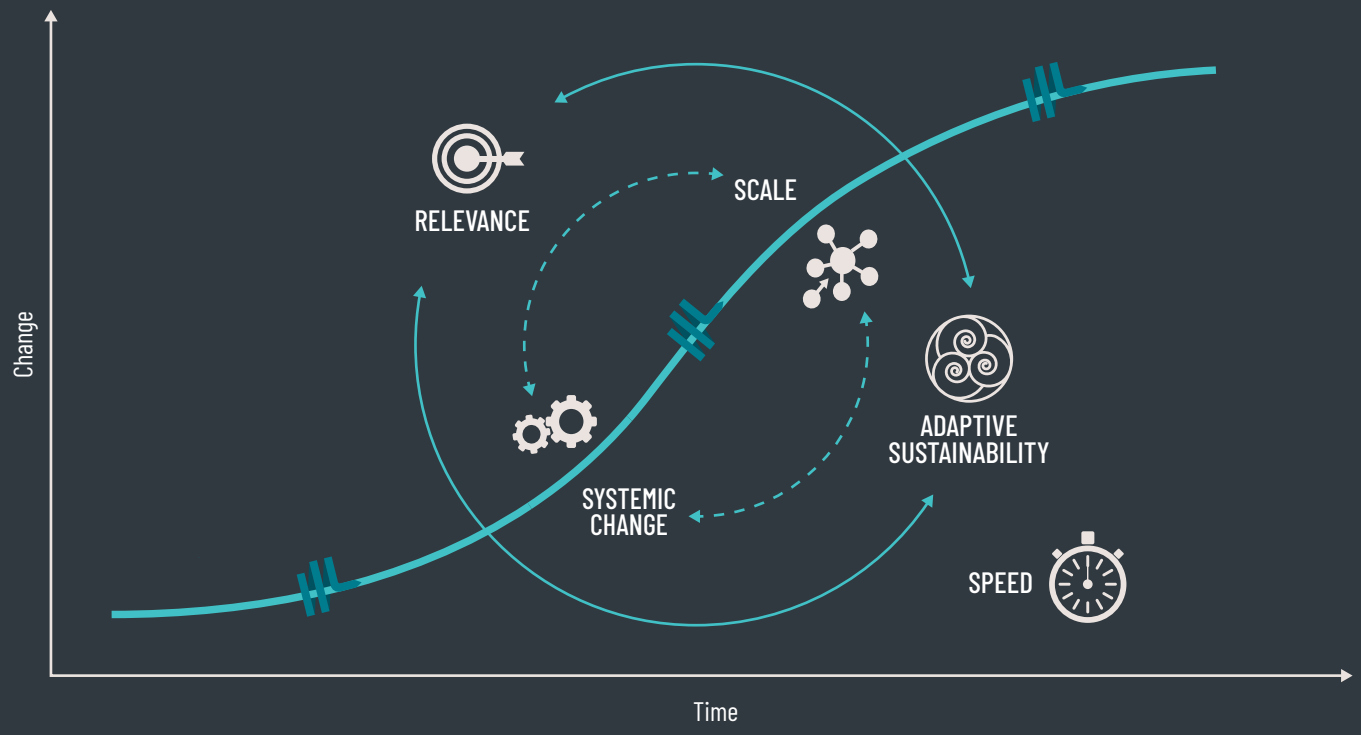
This section outlines the strong relationships, interactions, and even overlaps that exist across the transformational change dimensions. The nature of the relationships between the dimensions is nuanced and not linear.

The **Relevance** dimension is in play throughout the transformational change process, as it is linked to the ongoing dynamic process of alignment with contextual factors and the directional attributes (goals) of change. Interventions establish and maintain **relevance** by considering the intervention's contributions to systemic change, speed, scaling, and adaptive sustainability.

The **speed** of change relates to the acceleration of transformational processes. Early signals of transformational change impacts may be modest or even barely discernible, as a sufficient combination of **systemic changes** are needed to overcome barriers and foster enabling conditions to boost the **speed** of **scaling.** In other cases, the early **scaling** of a change through a large-scale investment can catalyze **systemic changes** that enable more **scaling** later. In either case, there can be a dynamic interplay between **systemic change, speed,** and **scaling.** As systems are transformed, new equilibriums emerge, whereby the systemic changes support a "new normal" of decisions, actions, and/or practices.

As change advances and new equilibriums begin to manifest, the **Adaptive Sustainability** dimension takes on greater importance. The robustness and resilience of the **scaling** changes shape their durability in the face of pressure or shocks, while the adaptiveness of the transforming systems influences, and in some cases, **speeds** further transformation in response to evolving contexts. **Systemic changes** shape the depth and contours of robustness and resilience, thus affecting the sustainability of changes over time. **Adaptive sustainability** also requires ongoing **relevance** to contexts and opportunities.

FIGURE 2. "S-CURVE" MODEL USING DIMENSIONS TO TRACK TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN CLIMATE ACTION




While transformational change in complex systems often unfolds in winding and unpredictable ways, patterns relevant to the adoption and diffusion of specific actions, technologies, and practices can be discerned in transforming systems. A legacy of studies point to the potential usefulness of the classic "S-curve" for understanding and thinking about the dynamic interplay between the dimensions of change.[5] The S-curve (see Figure 2) recognizes that change does not happen in a linear way and reflects how progress in diffusing and scaling climate actions may lag, if further systemic changes and other groundwork are needed to foster the enabling conditions and overcome barriers to change. **It is important to note that the progress of transformational change over time can vary widely in the curves they actually follow,** as is discussed further in the insights section.

# KEY INSIGHTS RELEVANT TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE FOR CLIMATE ACTION

This section explores the key insights that arose during the TCLP discussions, which provide further details on how the TCLP is currently thinking about the concepts of transformational change for climate action, as outlined in this document.

**INSIGHT 1: Transformation at the depth and breadth needed to address the climate crisis is a very ambitious global goal, requiring changes spanning natural and human systems as well as on all scales.** Positive transformation, in terms of climate change, requires complex socio-economic and political systems that are relevant to clean technology, energy access, climate resilience, and sustainable landscapes to move towards a "new normal". Essentially, these outcomes, along with the underlying behaviors, decisions, and actions that support them, have to become commonplace. In this context, achieving progress fully, along all the transformational change dimensions, reflects a high degree of ambition for change.

**INSIGHT 2: Transformational change entails evolving the focus and targets in tandem with the change in the contexts, even while ultimate goals may remain constant.** Transformational change goes beyond getting from an initial state A to a particular end state B. As discussed under the Relevance and Adaptive Sustainability dimensions, transformational change occurs in a dynamic context where the desired changes and targets often need to evolve over time. In the context of climate change, decarbonization and resilience may endure as overall goals, even as the climate actions and technologies to achieve these goals may need to evolve or change over time. These shifts are needed to account for advances in technology and changes in what people value, along with changes in the broader conditions and context in which the transformations are nested. This recognition of evolving needs requires agility, nimbleness, and adaptability for it to work. It is usually underpinned by the enhanced ability of individual and institutional learning to advance transformational change and

FIGURE 3. SUCCESSIVE WAVES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE CAN BUILD ON EACH OTHER OVER TIME.

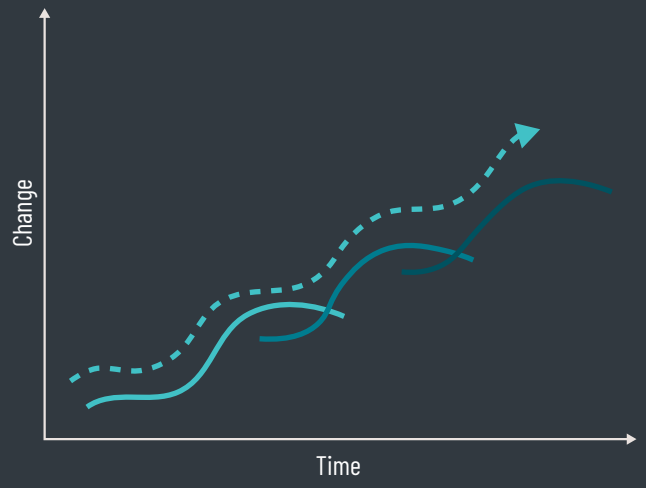
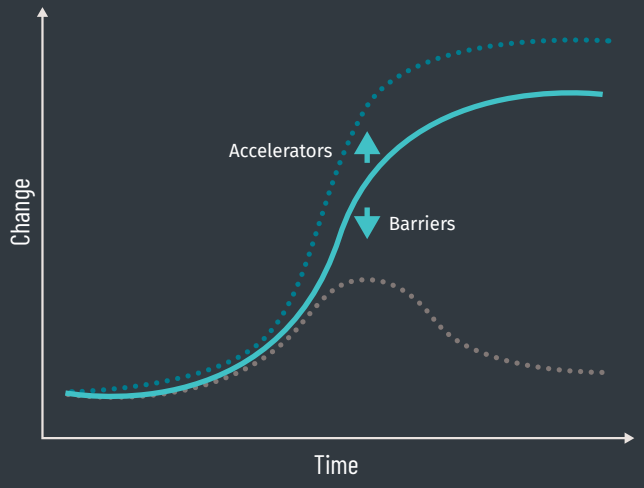



FIGURE 4. INCREMENTAL CHANGES MAY ACCELERATE TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS, BUT OTHERS MAY BE INSUFFICIENT TO OVERCOME BARRIERS.



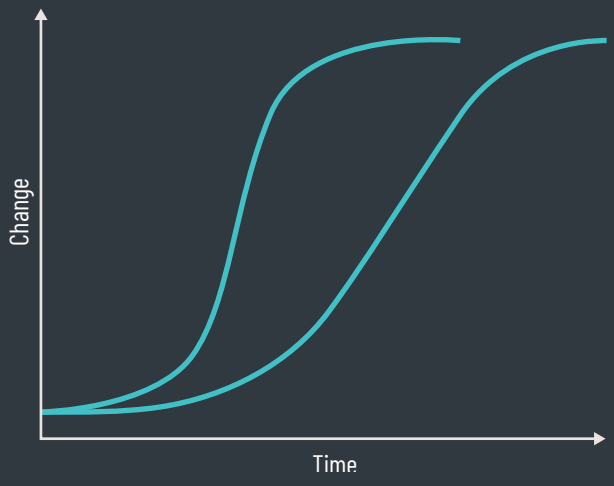

ensure the relevance of change. Figure 3 shows how successive waves of transformational change can build on each other over time.

INSIGHT 3: **Incremental change and reform are not the same as transformation, although well-timed incremental changes that overcome barriers can lead to transformation.** While incremental change and the reform of current systems may lead or shift to transformation in some contexts, it should not be confused with transformation. Incremental changes and reforms that advance systemic changes by overcoming barriers and creating new opportunities in timely ways can catalyze and support transformational processes which enable the accelerated scaling of climate actions. Figure 4 shows how some incremental changes may help accelerate transformational processes, whereas others may be insufficient to overcome the barriers that are preventing the transformational processes from unfolding and taking off.

INSIGHT 4: **While programs and projects can contribute to transformational change, they need to be conducted with skillful navigation in an arena with many actors, initiatives, and forces at play.** In complex systems, numerous actors, initiatives, and forces shape how a system evolves—sometimes in aligned directions, sometimes in very different directions. At the same time, events and trends unfold to shape the context for change in evolving, disruptive, and oppositional ways. The ability of a program or project to catalyze, contribute to, or support shifts and transformation in a complex system is often mediated through this larger dynamic context of activities, actors, and forces. The skillful navigation of this landscape is typically needed to enhance the transformational impact of interventions. This reality often creates challenges for clearly assessing the contributions of individual programs, projects, and actors to transformational change.

INSIGHT 5: **Shifts in societal and economic power relations, decision-making authority, inclusion, and distributional effects are common in transformations.** These power shifts can occur as part of systemic changes that create the enabling conditions for change. They can also take place as change scales and the distributional effects of large-scale change alter the locus of economic and political power. Power shifts can manifest between institutions, levels of government, and private sector actors, as well as along other axes. Resistance to shifts can increase barriers to transformation, while expanded access to power can have a snowballing effect that accelerates transformational processes.

FIGURE 5. TRANSFORMATION TAKES PLACE AT DIFFERENT TIMEFRAMES AND SPEEDS.




Such shifts in power can play out in disruptive or smooth pathways, depending on the context and the characteristics of change. Ensuring equitable and just transitions, as part of the efforts to combat climate change, is an important normative goal. This is related to the advancement of inclusion and distributional impacts consistent with international norms that are reflected in the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

INSIGHT 6: **Transformation takes place at different timeframes and speeds. Change processes are not linear.** They often happen in fits and starts—sometimes with backsliding, sometimes with rapid acceleration and scaling. Substantial work on systemic changes that create the pre-conditions for transformation may not manifest in clear results for some time but may later be followed by significant scaling and impact. Therefore, promoting transformation demands both assertiveness and patience. Figure 5 illustrates transformations taking place at different times and speeds.

INSIGHT 7: **Changes relevant to transformation can occur at many levels, although scale matters in climate action.** In most cases, broad transformations—including at the national or global scale—require substantial transformations at the local level. As discussed under the scale dimension, positive transformations supporting climate action can happen in households, communities, and at other levels. While these changes can be valuable and beneficial on their own, the urgency of the climate crisis necessitates the expansion of changes to large scales. Furthermore, local transformations need to reach a critical level of scale to enable broader transformational change.

INSIGHT 8: **The ultimate impacts of transformational change in societal systems on natural systems are mediated through society's embedded relationship with natural systems.** While human actions undeniably influence natural systems, such as climate or ecosystems, our power to bring about positive transformational change in natural systems through direct action is limited. Rather, we can only create the conditions that enable a natural system to recover or continue to flourish.

# CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The unabated and increasing urgency and scale of the climate crisis demand transformative action. The dimensions and insights captured in this document reflect the ongoing efforts of the TCLP to use research, analysis, expert opinion, and collaborative discussion to further refine the key concepts related to transformational change for use in designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and learning from climate investments. The TCLP's definition and dimensions of transformational change will be explored with TCLP, CIF, and other stakeholders over the next several months. They will be actively applied to a variety of new and ongoing climate programs, projects, and other initiatives across a range of sectors and contexts. These concepts will continue to be revisited and revised periodically in the spirit of continuous learning and adaptation, based on additional experiences and ongoing reflection.

# ANNEX 1. DISCUSSION NOTES

The updated transformational change concepts presented in this document are built on the concepts initially developed by the CIF TCLP during its first two years (2017–2019). In 2020, Concepts, Methods, and Metrics (CMM) Interest Group participants began discussing the updates and participated in several rounds of revisions. The notes below summarize the discussions of the TCLP and CMM Interest Group participants.

| CONCEPT | DISCUSSION NOTES |
|---|---|
| **Working Definition of Transformational Change** page 6 | The TCLP's working definition of transformational change in climate action was updated in 2021 to expand its focus to systems beyond markets in order to remove the idea of "strategic change", which implies that the definition has an interventionist focus, and to more clearly outline the key aspects of progress that are sought beyond emissions reductions and resilience. (The original working definition of transformational change in climate action, developed by the TCLP in 2017, read: Strategic changes in targeted markets and other systems, with large-scale, sustainable impacts that shift and/or accelerate the trajectory toward low-carbon and climate-resilient development.) The TCLP wrestled with which terms would best capture the desired direction of change, recognizing that many terms have both benefits and drawbacks. The TCLP arrived at "climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development" to draw attention to the importance of inclusivity, just transitions, and broader sustainable development outcomes. Additional text was also added to underscore how a general definition of transformational change accommodates of changes and impacts viewed as positive or negative—a recurring issue raised in TCLP discussions—whereas the working definition of transformational change for climate action focuses on the needed transformations for averting the climate crisis. |
| **Relevance** page 7 | The Relevance dimension description was revised to allow for its application to both targeted interventions and other systems changes; clarify the importance of context and opportunity; and highlight that transformations relevant to climate action should advance progress towards the goals outlined in the working definition of transformational change. (The previous description of the Relevance dimension framed that dimension as "the strategic focus, design, and nimbleness of initiatives to enable transformation." The TCLP wrestled with how and where in the dimensions to best capture the need for ongoing adaptiveness. The revisions have incorporated this idea of continued adaptiveness into both the Relevance and Adaptive Sustainability dimensions. The graphic in Figure 1 emphasizes the dynamic interplay between these two dimensions. There were also a wide range of perspectives among TCLP participants about where and how to incorporate the aspect of "timeliness". It has been included within the Relevance dimension (e.g., relevant change is attentive to timing) and, in a slightly different form, in the dimension of Speed (e.g., in response to urgency). |
| **Speed** page 9 | The Speed dimension was added in 2021 to emphasize the closing window of opportunity for making the transformations needed to avert the catastrophic impacts of climate change. While the urgency of the climate crisis underscores the importance of accelerating climate action progress, it is also important to consider the appropriate speed of changes to ensure sufficient time and sequencing for desired change to occur and set in (e.g., recognizing that some changes cannot be rushed). The Speed dimension brings more explicit attention to these important aspects and enable additional input from CIF's partners and stakeholders. In Figure 1, the shading of the Speed dimension is also different from the other dimensions in order to acknowledge that this dimension serves as a lens or axis for taking the other dimensions into consideration, such as the acceleration of Systemic Change or Scale. |
| **Adaptive Sustainability** page 10 | The Sustainability dimension was updated in 2021 to be reframed as Adaptive Sustainability (the original description of the Sustainability dimension was "the robustness and resilience of changes"). Changes to this dimension and its supporting text highlight that ongoing adaptive capacity is needed to ensure that transformational changes important for climate action and progress evolve and change over time, as innovation and changes in context and goals occur. There is an important interplay between the Relevance and Adaptive Sustainability dimensions. |

# ENDNOTES

1 The authors are aware that the interpretations, principles, and practices associated with the term, "development", are often contested and subject to change. This includes tensions between the different conceptualizations of progress, agency, growth, well-being, power structures, etc., which are relevant to the varying views and interpretations of transformational change. It is assumed that the concept of development itself will not be left unchanged in the process of transformational change.

2 The dimensions were developed through the TCLP's facilitated learning process and informed by existing literature. They are built on the work done by the World Bank Group's Independent Evaluation Group.

3 The nine Arenas of Intervention for climate action, developed by the TCLP in 2017, provide a starting point for identifying the types of systemic changes that may need to be considered to advance systemic change through interventions. They include: financing; governance and engagement; institutions; knowledge and information; markets; natural capital; policies; practices and mindsets; and technologies and infrastructure.

4 The term "adaptive sustainability" has been used increasingly in the evaluation field as a concept or criterion relevant to evaluating transformations. For example, see Michael Quinn Patton, "Evaluation Criteria for Evaluating Transformation: Implications for the Coronavirus Pandemic and the Global Climate Emergency," *American Journal of Evaluation* 42, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 53–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214020933689.

5 Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition,* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

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