

THE SIX CONDITIONS FRAMEWORK AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVES IN CHILD CARE SYSTEM REFORM

Alexandra SAFRONOVA

Master in Sociology, PhD Candidate,
Moldova State University, Moldova
E-mail: safronova.alex.87@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0004-6532-2497

Abstract: *Reforming a national childcare system is a complex social problem that requires systemic change, as its causes are deeply rooted and the actors involved are highly interdependent. Traditional approaches often address only visible symptoms and are insufficient for creating lasting, transformative results. While the Collective Impact model (Kania & Kramer, 2011) provides a structured approach for multi-sector collaboration through its five key conditions, it requires a deeper analytical lens to examine the full scope of systemic change. To address this challenge, it is suggested to use the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018) as a tool to analyze the depth and quality of transformations occurring within a Collective Impact initiative. The framework examines change across three levels: explicit (policies, practices, resources), semi-explicit (relationships, power dynamics), and implicit (mental models). The research analyzes outcome level monitoring data from the child care system strengthening initiative in the Republic of Moldova, which supports the transition from institutional to family-based child care. Data was collected using the Outcome Harvesting methodology, which identifies specific changes, traces the initiative's contribution to them, and validates findings with external sources. Preliminary analysis reveals changes at all three systemic levels. At the explicit level, new national policies and budget allocations for family-type services were documented. At the semi-explicit level, strengthened partnerships between local authorities and NGOs were observed, alongside shifts in decision-making dynamics. At the implicit level, early evidence suggests gradual changes in professional mindsets regarding the role of family care versus institutional placement. The Six Conditions framework provides a practical and holistic tool for evaluating complex social reforms.*

Keywords: *systems change, six conditions for systems change, Collective Impact, child care reform, Outcome Harvesting, Moldova, deinstitutionalization.*

Classification JEL: Z13.

UDC: 347.645:369.742 **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.53486/ser2026.23>

1. Introduction

Reforming a national child care system is a complex social challenge that requires systemic change, that is, confronting root causes by transforming structures, customs, mindsets, power dynamics, and policies through the active collaboration of diverse actors (Catalyst 2030, n.d.). In post-Soviet countries, including the Republic of Moldova, the legacy of institutionalization has created structures, habits, and mindsets that resist transformation. During the transition period, the region inherited a public attitude and a state approach dominated by institutionalization, where uniform family support schemes, such as social insurance, free education and health, full employment were designed for supposedly uniform family needs, and institutionalization was the default solution for families facing difficulties (UNICEF, 1999).

Traditional interventions that focus only on visible symptoms, such as isolated programmatic activities or short-term service delivery, are rarely sufficient to generate sustainable systemic change. Collective Impact (CI) is the methodology that has gained prominence for structuring such collaboration (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Defined as the commitment of a

group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem, Collective Impact relies on five key conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and dedicated backbone support (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Since it was formally described in 2011, CI has been applied in education, public health, juvenile justice, and child protection, both in North America and increasingly in European contexts (Beerman et al., 2021; NYS Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, n.d.).

However, while Collective Impact provides a vehicle for aligning actors and resources, it does not, on its own, offer a framework for analyzing the change occurring within a system. In complex domains such as child care reform, success depends not only on formal policy shifts but also on transforming relationships, power dynamics, and deeply held beliefs about what constitutes appropriate care for children. This article addresses this gap by integrating the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework (Kania et al., 2018) as an analytical lens for examining Collective Impact initiatives.

The research draws on outcome-level monitoring data from the Changing the Way We Care (CTWWC) initiative in the Republic of Moldova, which supports the transition from institutional to family-based care. Using Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau, 2019; Wakia & Safronova, 2025), the study captures changes in the behavior of key actors, such as government officials, civil society organizations, faith-based groups, and communities, and analyzes them through the three levels of the Six Conditions framework: explicit (policies, practices, resource flows), semi-explicit (relationships, power dynamics), and implicit (mental models).

2. Literature Review

Collective Impact as a Methodology for Multi-Sector Collaboration

The Collective Impact methodology emerged from the recognition that complex social problems cannot be solved by single organizations acting alone. In their seminal article, Kania and Kramer (2011) argued that the fragmentation characteristic of social sector interventions leads to isolated efforts that fail to produce systemic change. Collective Impact was proposed as a structured alternative, bringing together actors from government, civil society, business, and philanthropy around a common agenda for change.

The methodology rests on five key conditions. A common agenda requires that all participants share a vision for change, including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it. Shared measurement systems involve collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants, ensuring that efforts remain aligned and accountability is maintained. Mutually reinforcing activities recognize that effective collaboration does not require all partners to do the same thing; rather, participants engage in differentiated activities coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action. Continuous communication emphasizes that trust cannot be built through occasional meetings; open and consistent communication builds relationships, assures mutual objectives, and creates common motivation. Finally, backbone support acknowledges that effective collaboration requires dedicated infrastructure. This should be a separate organization or structure with dedicated staff that provides ongoing support, managing

logistics, facilitating communication, and ensuring that the collective work remains on track (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Since its introduction, Collective Impact has been applied across diverse policy domains. In the United States, it has been used to address educational achievement gaps, public health challenges, and juvenile justice reform (NYS Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, n.d.). In Europe, interest has grown steadily, with initiatives emerging in urban security, social cohesion, and child protection (Beerman et al., 2021).

Evolution of the Six Conditions for Systems Change Framework

While Collective Impact provides a methodology for structuring collaboration, it does not offer tools for analyzing the changes produced. This gap led to the development of the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework, which builds on foundational work in systems thinking. The framework's theoretical roots lie in two key sources: Donella Meadows' Iceberg Model and the ABLe Change Framework developed by Foster-Fishman and Watson.

The Iceberg Model, popularized by Donella Meadows (The Donella Meadows Project, n.d.), offers a way of understanding why systems behave as they do. According to this model, events represent the visible tip of the iceberg, e.g. incidents and occurrences that can be easily observed. Below the surface lie patterns of behavior, the trends that emerge over time. Deeper still is system structure, including relationships between different parts of the system that shape how events and patterns unfold. At the deepest level the values, assumptions, and deeply held beliefs that ultimately determine how the system operates. The model illustrates that most factors determining system behavior remain hidden beneath the surface, and identifying these hidden structures is essential for developing durable solutions (The Donella Meadows Project, n.d.).

The ABLe Change Framework, developed by Foster-Fishman and Watson (2012), offers a complementary perspective. The framework distinguishes between components that are "above the line", including the visible elements of social systems, and those that lie "below the line", namely, the operational processes and hidden mechanisms that determine how change initiatives translate into practice. The purpose of the "below the line" component is to ensure that change initiatives are effectively implemented and sustained. The framework emphasizes the interplay between content and process, recognizing that both are essential for systemic transformation.

Building on these foundations, Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018) proposed the Six Conditions for Systems Change, organizing the insights from systems thinking into an actionable framework. The model identifies six critical conditions that influence systemic transformation, arranged across three levels of visibility. At the structural level, the most visible one, are policies, practices, and resource flows. Policies refer to government, institutional, and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide actions. Practices encompass the activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social progress. Resource flows describe how money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets are allocated and distributed. This structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

At the relational level, which is less visible but still accessible, are relationships and connections, and power dynamics. Relationships and connections refer to the quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints. Power dynamics describe the distribution of

decision-making power, authority, and influence among individuals and organizations. Finally, at the deepest, most implicit level, are mental models: the habits of thought, deeply held beliefs, and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.

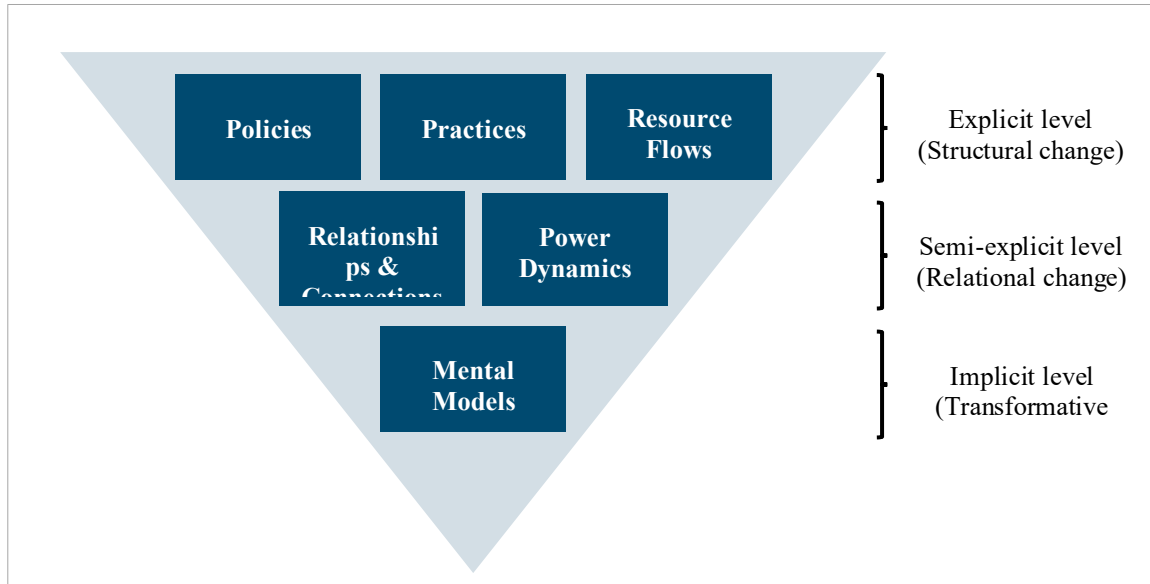


Figure 1. Six Conditions for Systems Change

Source: Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change. FSG.

The framework's key insight is that sustainable systemic transformation requires working across all three levels. Explicit changes, like shifts in policies, practices, and resources, are essential but insufficient on their own. Without attention to relationships, power dynamics, and mental models, shifts in system conditions are unlikely to be sustained.

Understanding Outcomes and Theory of Change in Complex Interventions

To evaluate systemic change initiatives, it is necessary to understand what is meant by an "outcome" and how outcomes relate to broader theories of change. In the field of international development and project management, the logical framework approach and results-based management have provided a vocabulary for thinking about results. The logical framework, initially developed by USAID in 1969 and subsequently adopted by bilateral donors worldwide, organizes interventions into a hierarchy of levels: inputs, activities, outputs, purpose, and goal (World Bank, 2000). Each level is accompanied by indicators, means of verification, and assumptions about external factors (Coleman, 1987).

As results-based management gained prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this vocabulary was refined. The results chain introduced a more detailed set of distinctions: inputs (the resources used for intervention), activities (the actions taken), outputs (the products and services resulting from activities), outcomes (the short- and medium-term effects of outputs), and impact (the longer-term, higher-level effects) (Kusek & Rist, 2004; OECD, 2022). Within this framework, outcomes are understood as changes in the capacities and behaviors of external actors, more precisely - shifts that occur between the completion of activities and the achievement of broader impacts (OECD, 2022).

Outcome Harvesting: A Methodology for Capturing Complex Change

Given the complexity of systemic change initiatives, traditional monitoring approaches that rely on pre-specified indicators are often inadequate. Outcome Harvesting was developed as an alternative methodology specifically designed for contexts where cause-effect relationships are difficult to understand in advance (Wilson-Grau, 2019). The method is retrospective: rather than specifying outcomes in advance and then measuring progress against them, Outcome Harvesting searches for outcomes that have occurred and then works backward to understand how the intervention contributed to them.

The methodology defines an outcome as “*a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution*” (Wilson-Grau, 2019). This definition shifts attention from activities to the changes that matter for a lasting systemic change. The method involves six steps: designing the harvest, formulating outcomes, reviewing outcomes, analyzing and interpreting, substantiating findings, and using the results to inform adaptive management (Wilson-Grau, 2019). Substantiation is a particularly important step, involving external validation of findings by independent individuals knowledgeable about the outcomes. This addresses concerns about bias and ensures that outcomes are not merely claimed but confirmed. Outcome Harvesting has been used across a range of sectors, including human rights, health, education, and child protection. Its value lies in its ability to capture complex, non-linear changes that would be missed by more traditional monitoring approaches.

3. Methodology

The research employed a retrospective monitoring approach based on Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau, 2019), followed by a systematic categorization of the harvested outcomes using the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework (Kania et al., 2018). This design was chosen to capture the multidimensional nature of systemic change within a Collective Impact initiative and to analyze the depth of transformations occurring at different levels of the system. The research focuses on the Changing the Way We Care (CTWWC) initiative in the Republic of Moldova, a global program supporting the transition from institutional to family-based care.

Moldova’s care system is highly government-led, and the initiative has worked since 2021 with national and subnational government actors, civil society, faith-based organizations, and communities. CTWWC adopted a Collective Impact approach, aiming to coordinate diverse actors around a common agenda for care reform (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). The primary data source was the Outcome Harvesting monitoring system implemented by CTWWC. Between 2019 and 2025, the initiative documented 90 outcomes in Moldova, each representing a specific change in the behavior of an external actor. The process followed the six steps of Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau, 2019):

1. Design the harvest: defining the users and key questions.
2. Formulate outcomes: drafting a description of each observed change, its relevance to the initiative’s objectives, the initiative’s contribution, and the source of information.
3. Review outcomes: quality assurance through a collaborative “ping-pong” process.
4. Analyze and interpret categorizing outcomes by actor type, behavior change type, and level of change.

5. Substantiate: validating findings with external sources (government counterparts, peer organizations) in 2021 and 2023.
6. Use findings: informing adaptive management and learning.

Each outcome was recorded using a standardized template, ensuring consistency and completeness. Substantiation largely confirmed the accuracy of the outcomes (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). After the outcomes were validated, they were subjected to a second layer of categorization using the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework (Kania et al., 2018). This involved mapping each outcome to one of the six conditions: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, or mental models.

The mapping was guided by the definitions of the conditions and examples provided in the framework. The analytical approach moved from identifying individual behavior changes to understanding their systemic significance by locating them within the Six Conditions framework. This integration made it possible to distinguish between explicit changes and deeper semi-explicit and implicit changes within the Collective Impact initiative.

4. Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis of outcomes harvested in Moldova by January 2025 revealed that CTWWC documented 90 examples of actors changing their behavior as a result, at least in part, of CTWWC interventions (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). Government actors represented most outcomes, with 69 outcomes involving national or subnational government actors. This reflects the highly government-led nature of Moldova's care system and the initiative's strategic focus on strengthening government structures and processes. Residential care providers accounted for 9 outcomes, civil society actors for 4, faith-based actors for 3, people with lived experience networks for 3, and other actors for 2 outcomes (Wakia & Safronova, 2025).

To analyze the depth of these changes, each outcome was mapped to one of the six conditions of the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework (Kania et al., 2018) and assigned to the corresponding level of visibility. The resulting distribution is shown in Figure 2, which presents the number of outcomes by condition and actor type. Government actors dominated across all conditions, particularly in policies, practices, and power dynamics. Civil society and faith-based actors contributed to changes in policies and mental models, while people with lived experience (PWLE) were present in resource flows and mental models.

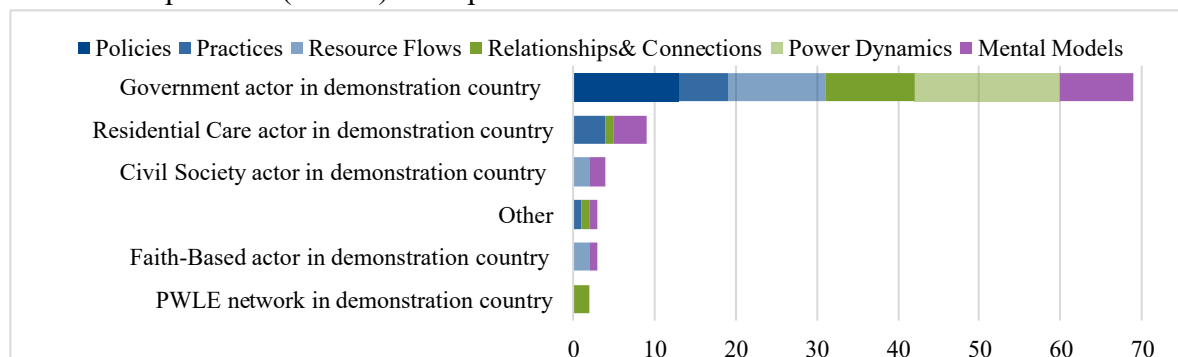


Figure 2. Number of outcomes in Moldova by condition and actor type (n = 90)

Source: Wakia, J., & Safronova, A. (2025). Outcome Harvesting within Changing the Way We Care: Report 2: Results and system strengthening learning. Catholic Relief Services.

When aggregated by level, the outcomes reveal a balanced spread across the three levels of systemic change (see Figure 3). The explicit level accounted for 40 outcomes. Within this level, resource flows (16 outcomes) were the most frequent, followed by policies (13 outcomes) and practices (11 outcomes). The semi-explicit level totaled 33 outcomes, with power dynamics (18 outcomes) outnumbering relationships and connections (15 outcomes). Finally, the implicit level accounted for 17 outcomes, representing the deepest and least visible form of change. The distribution suggests that the initiative was successful not only in producing visible structural changes but also in shifting relational dynamics and, to a notable degree, underlying mental models.

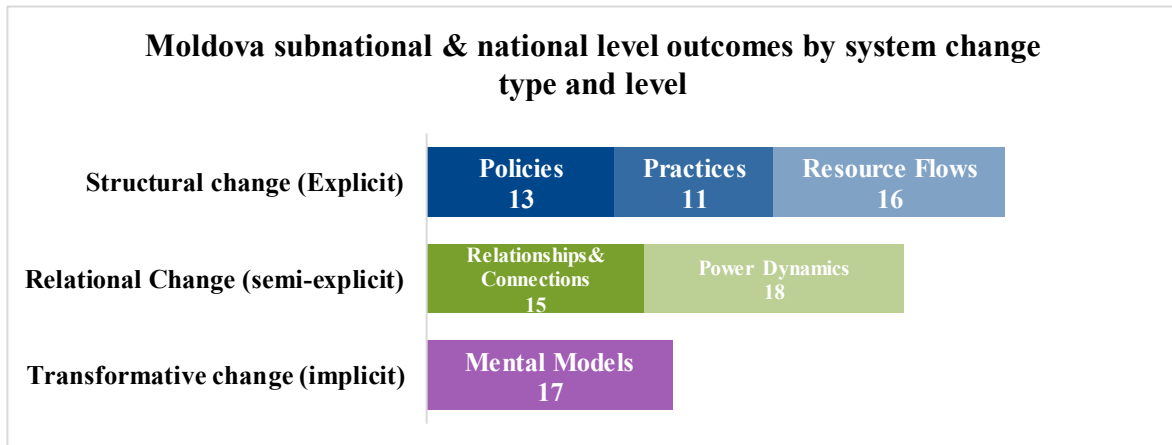


Figure 3. Number of outcomes in Moldova by system change type (n = 90)

Source: adapted from Wakia, J., & Safronova, A. (2025). Outcome Harvesting within Changing the Way We Care: Report 2: Results and system strengthening learning. Catholic Relief Services.

At the explicit level - changes in policies, practices, and resource flows, the analysis documented 40 outcomes. Within this category, 13 outcomes were policy changes, 11 were practice changes, and 16 were changes in resource flows. These represent the most visible transformations. The policy changes reflect a deepening commitment to care reform at the highest levels: the 2022 National Child Protection Program, the inclusion of foster care in the minimum social protection package (June 2022), and the presentation of deinstitutionalization plans (March 2025) (Wakia & Safronova, 2025).

Practice changes included improved child assessments, increased reintegration with follow-up support, expanded foster care services, and greater local government involvement in foster care decisions. The 16 resource flow changes, notably government financing for the social service workforce and budget reallocations toward family-based services, indicate that the initiative influenced not only policy but also tangible allocation of resources.

Challenges and Limitations

Several methodological challenges should be noted. First, outcomes had to be known or observed by a member of the CTWWC team, meaning outcomes occurring at a distance or through knock-on effects were unlikely to be included (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). Second, describing outcomes in a manner consistent with the methodology was challenging for team members, potentially affecting data completeness (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). Third, the inherent difficulty of observing and documenting mental model changes means that the four outcomes at this level likely underrepresent actual change. Fourth, classification inconsistencies between team members required careful

management and regular discussion (Wakia & Safronova, 2025). Despite these challenges, the dataset provides a rich foundation for analyzing the depth and quality of changes occurring within the Collective Impact initiative.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis is based on outcomes documented by CTWWC team members, meaning that changes not observed or not considered important may have been missed. This introduces a potential observer bias. Second, the focus on Moldova limits the generalizability of findings, though the theoretical framework is applicable across contexts. Third, while the Six Conditions framework provides a valuable analytical lens, the categorization of outcomes into conditions inevitably involves subjective judgment.

5. Conclusions

This article has proposed the Six Conditions for Systems Change framework as an analytical tool for examining Collective Impact initiatives. Drawing on outcome-level monitoring data from a child care system strengthening initiative in the Republic of Moldova, the analysis has revealed changes across all three systemic levels.

At the explicit level, 40 outcomes documented new policies, improved practices, and notable resource flow shifts. At the semi-explicit level, 33 outcomes documented strengthened relationships and significant shifts in power dynamics, including the elevation of child protection to the Prime Minister's level. At the implicit level, 17 outcomes provided evidence of shifting mental models among professionals, local administrators, and the workforce.

The findings demonstrate that the Six Conditions framework meaningfully complements Collective Impact methodology by providing analytical depth and helping us see beneath the surface of collaboration. By focusing on all three levels of change, the integrated approach increases the potential for collaborative initiatives to achieve durable, systemic transformation (Kania et al., 2018).

For practitioners, the Moldova case offers several lessons. First, invest in relationships from the start, because they enable everything else. Second, together with key stakeholders, create spaces for co-creation, not just consultation. Third, track changes at all three levels, not just visible outputs. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of long-term engagement and adaptive management. Systemic change does not happen quickly, and funding cycles of two to three years are insufficient to support the kind of transformation documented in Moldova.

For researchers, this study suggests that combining Collective Impact with the Six Conditions framework offers a promising approach for evaluating complex social reforms. Future research could explore how the framework applies in other contexts and sectors, how mental model changes can be more effectively documented, and how the interplay between levels of change can be better understood.

In conclusion, the Six Conditions framework provides a practical and holistic tool for evaluating complex social reforms. By examining changes across all three levels, it helps distinguish between superficial adjustments and deep, lasting systemic transformation. Evidence from Moldova confirms that such transformation is possible but requires looking below the waterline.

6. References

- Beerman, R., Beke, M., & Wynarski, J. (2021). *The Collective Impact model and its application in European cities, with a special focus on the topic of urban security and social cohesion*. Urban Agenda for the EU.
- Catalyst 2030. (n.d.). *About systems change*. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from <https://catalyst2030.net/what-is-systems-change>
- Coleman, G. (1987). Logical framework approach to the monitoring and evaluation of agricultural and rural development projects. *Project Appraisal*, 2(4), 251–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02688867.1987.9726638>
- Foster-Fishman, P. G., & Watson, E. R. (2012). The ABLe Change Framework: A conceptual and methodological tool for promoting systems change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 49(3-4), 503-516. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-011-9454-x>
- Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36–41. <https://doi.org/10.48558/5900-KN19>
- Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). *The water of systems change*. FSG.
- Kusek, J. Z., & Rist, R. C. (2004). *Ten steps to a results-based monitoring and evaluation system: A handbook for development practitioners*. World Bank.
- New York State Juvenile Justice Advisory Group. (2014). *New York State juvenile justice: Progress toward system excellence*. Collective Impact Forum.
- OECD. (2023). *Glossary of key terms in evaluation and results-based management for sustainable development* (2nd ed.). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/632da462-en-fr-es>
- The Donella Meadows Project. (n.d.). *Systems thinking resources: The iceberg model*. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from <https://donellameadows.org/systems-thinking-resources/>
- UNICEF. (1999). *After the fall: The human impact of ten years of transition*. UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Wakia, J., & Safronova, A. (2025). *Outcome Harvesting within Changing the Way We Care: Report 2: Results and system strengthening learning*. Catholic Relief Services.
- Wilson-Grau, R. (2019). *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications*. Information Age Publishing.
- World Bank. (2000). *The Logframe handbook: A logical framework approach to project cycle management*. World Bank.