

# TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE CONCEPTS: WORKING DEFINITION AND DIMENSIONS

*This is a living document summarizing the latest understanding of the Transformational Change Learning Partnership’s (TCLP) working definition and dimensions of transformational change for climate action. The working definition defines the goal of climate action, and the dimensions provide an emerging framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that contribute to achieving transformational change. These concepts were originally developed by the TCLP in 2017. Revisions to the concepts were developed in late 2020 and early 2021.*

## WORKING DEFINITION

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.

CIF’s TCLP has developed the following definition of transformational change for climate action:

**A fundamental change in systems relevant to climate action, with large-scale positive impacts that shift and accelerate the trajectory of progress toward climate-neutral, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development pathways.**

## DIMENSIONS

Transformational change dimensions are attributes of change in systems for addressing climate change. The five dimensions—Relevance, Systemic Change, Speed, Scale, and Adaptive Sustainability—vary in emphasis and significance, depending 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.



### Relevance

**Alignment with and attentiveness to goals and context through time.**

Relevance is an action-oriented framing dimension that illuminates the ongoing, dynamic relationship linking desired goals to context and opportunity. At the systems level, change can be assessed in terms of its relevance to, or alignment with, key goals (signaling “where we need to go”) and processes (signaling “who needs to be involved”). Relevance involves considering whether a climate action intervention has the right focus, framing, venues, and timing to contribute to transformations, given what is known and understood about targeted systems.



## QUICK FACTS

### PUBLICATION SERIES

Transformational Change Learning Brief

### PUBLICATION DATE

September 2021

### RELEVANT CIF PROGRAM

Transformational Change Learning Partnership

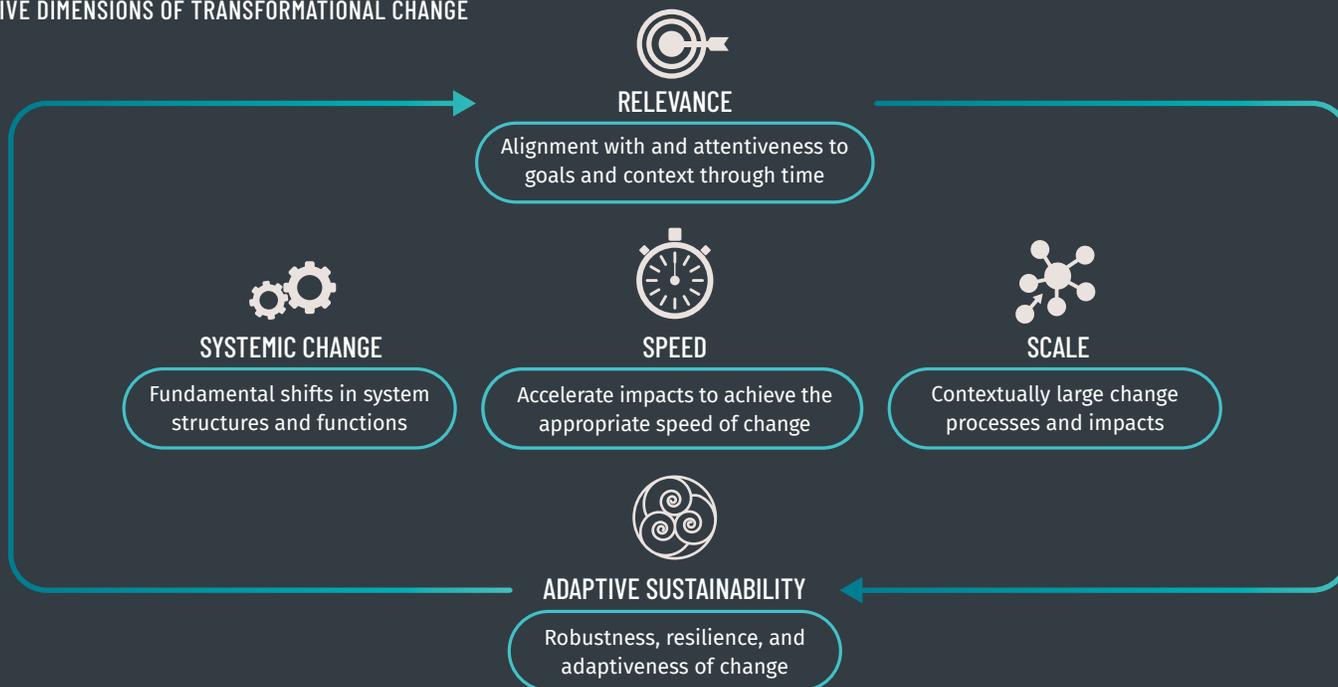
To access the full study please, click [here](#) or scan the QR code.

To access all CIF Transformational Change Learning Partnership publications, click [here](#).

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## FIVE DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE



### Systemic Change

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

Systemic changes involve shifting the structures, functions, and interrelationships of elements within systems that produce or shape the outputs and outcomes relevant to climate action. Systemic changes are generally needed to create the enabling conditions for transformational change, such as removing entrenched barriers, opening new opportunities or pathways, and shifting power dynamics.



### Speed

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

The urgency of the climate crisis necessitates the consideration of the speed and pace of change. Increases in global greenhouse gas (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 of action and progress. Climate action can be designed to accelerate or decelerate transformational processes and the realization of desired impacts.



### 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 at small or local levels, and builds up and out over time, as decisions, actions, or the adoption of practices or technologies diffuse. In other cases, scale may start at higher levels and impact other levels, such as through

large-scale nationally determined plans and investments that cascade down to smaller levels. Ultimately, higher-scaled climate actions are necessary to achieve the levels of GHG mitigation and resilience progress needed to address the climate crisis.



### Adaptive sustainability

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

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. It should be characterized by a new equilibrium or a “new normal” in systems that advance climate action progress. Adaptive sustainability is a framing dimension that recognizes the importance of people, systems, and change processes having the capacity to support learning and respond to changing circumstances and evolving needs over time.

## ADDITIONAL CONCEPTS FOR UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

The working definition and dimensions captured in this document reflect the ongoing efforts by 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. For more information about our work, including emerging **insights**, the **arenas of intervention** (entry points for action), along with **signals and stages** (ways of observing progress), please see the [TCLP webpage](#).