

# Enhancing Social Norms Programs:

**An Invitation to  
Rethink “Scaling Up”  
from a Feminist  
Perspective**





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# A Background

The Community for Understanding Scale Up (CUSP) is a group of eight organizations working across several regions with robust experience in scaling gender-based social norm change methodologies in various contexts— the [Center for Domestic Violence Prevention \(CEDOVIP\)](#), [Intervention with Microfinance for AIDS and Gender Equity \(IMAGE\)](#), the [Institute for Reproductive Health at Georgetown University](#), [Center on Gender Equity and Health \(GEH\) – UC San Diego](#), [Oxfam GB](#), [Raising Voices](#), [Salamander Trust](#), and [Tostan](#). Between us, we have created the [GREAT](#), [IMAGE](#), [SASA!](#), [Stepping Stones](#), [Tostan](#) and [We Can](#) programs.

CUSP represents a unique perspective of evidence-based approaches to gendered social norms change from organizations that have worked both autonomously and with a variety of partners to implement, adapt, and/or scale their interventions. Over the last four years, based on the growing demand from practitioners and donors, [CUSP](#) has reflected critically on what it takes to adapt and scale our approaches effectively and ethically.<sup>a</sup> During 2020 we decided to focus on what we would recommend proactively to achieve effective, ethical and sustainable adaptation and expansion of our respective programmatic materials and pedagogic approaches. We share these ideas in this thought piece.

We hope that this article will be of interest to, and spark debate amongst, anyone seeking to reduce violence against women and girls and to advance their sexual and reproductive health and rights, increasing the safety, security and well-being of women and girls in all their diversity, across the lifespan and around the world. These include both private and public funders, international NGOs, international development corporations, academics, government and UN organizations involved in this work. We also hope that the article is of use to women most affected by these issues in the Global South, and that it contributes to increasingly vocal and urgent global debates around decolonizing aid, ensuring funds reach those most affected by the issues, and promoting and upholding the work of existing feminist movement building.



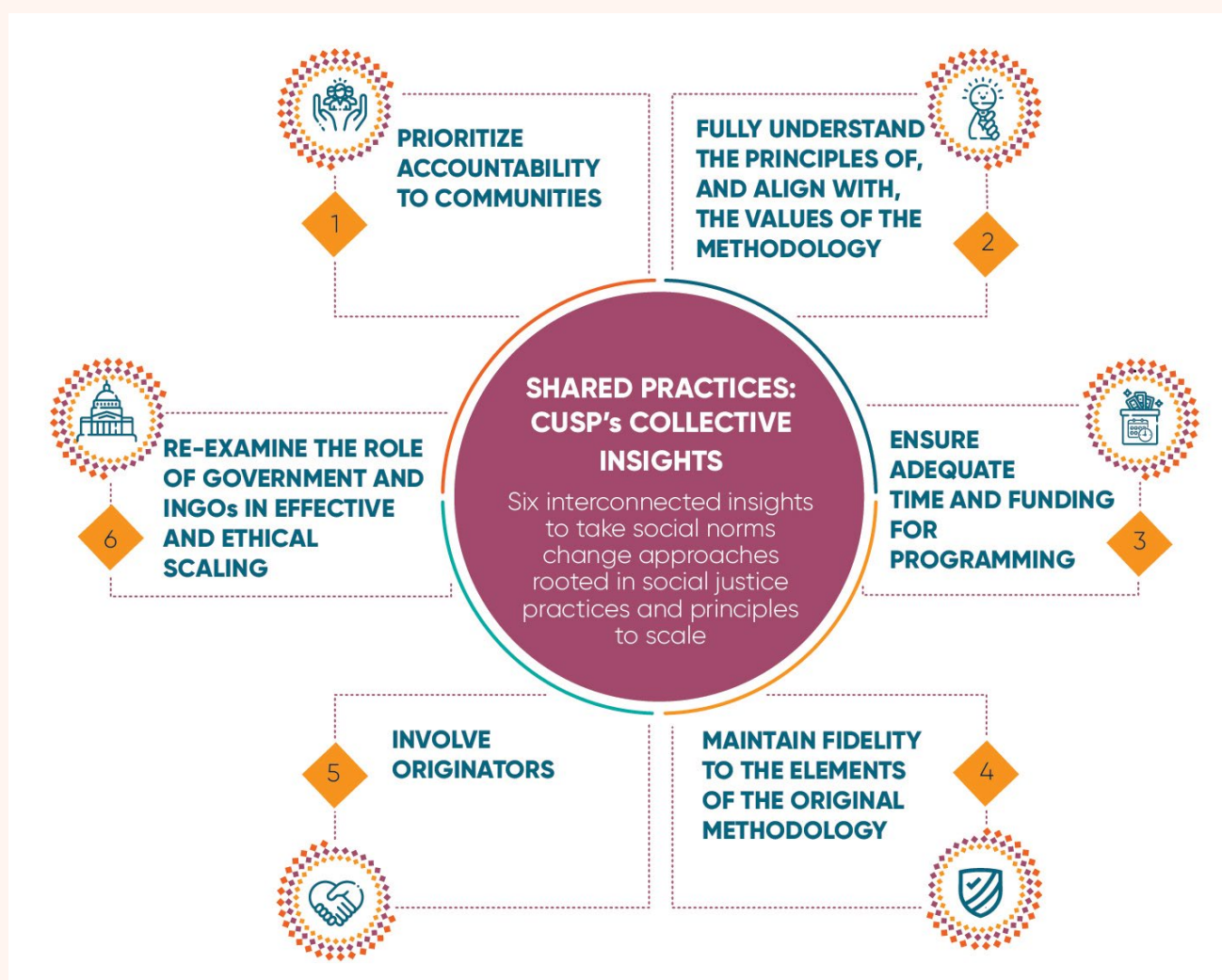
**CUSP represents a unique perspective of evidence-based approaches** to gendered social norms change from organizations that have worked both autonomously and with a variety of partners to implement, adapt, and/or scale their interventions.

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<sup>a</sup> To see links to all the CUSP publications, visit <https://salamandertrust.net/project/cusp-community-for-understanding-scale-up-case-studies-stepping-stones/>

In all the fora where we have shared our deliberations, we have emphasized our basic principles of engagement, based on our collective shared experiences (see Diagram 1).

**Diagram 1 – CUSP Collective Insights**



## A1 Our 2020 Deliberations

During 2020, we decided to explore “feminist scale,” what it might look like and mean and how it has been framed in discussions about expanding the work of human rights-based programs such as ours. We had previously focused mainly on various challenges we encountered with others’ adaptations and expansions of our programs. This time we decided to consider instead what kind of adaptation and expansion we would *like* to see. *Social norms scale* has been part of CUSP’s identity since our formation. In our 2020 discussions, we began asking: How does the concept of scaling and ‘scaling up,’ prevalent in ‘development’ sectors, fit with social norms change? Our methodologies were designed to align with feminist principles, but we found that these principles were frequently



lost when others took them to scale: namely, the focus shifted to numbers, geographies, efficiencies, rather than on the *process* of scale. Most of us had not heard the term ‘feminist scale’ but rather noted that the term ‘feminist movement(s)’ was common.<sup>b</sup> Would using new terminology broaden our vision of scale and better communicate the *values* behind our work rather than focusing on the more technical aspects? What kind of scaling best captures our hopes for program expansion? These questions allowed us to re-examine how we might best conceptualize efforts to expand our programs and better engage and, ideally, inspire the broader development community to reconsider ‘scale’ and how it is currently undertaken.



We had previously focused mainly on various challenges we encountered with others’ adaptations and expansions of our programs. This time we decided to consider instead what kind of adaptation and expansion we would *like* to see.

## A2 Our Aim

In her article on why scaling is “*really, really hard*,” Kelsey Piper asked: “*How can the gains from a program be so substantial when it’s first attempted and disappear entirely as soon as it’s expanded to cover more people?*”<sup>a</sup>

Our aim in this essay is to invite others exploring these issues, and/or wishing to fund or use our respective programs, into the dialogue about ethical, effective and sustainable ‘scale-up.’ While others have noted the problematics around ‘scaling up,’ the pressure is still on most international ‘development’ organizations, including ours, to scale up, to go to scale, to expand into new geographic spaces.<sup>2,3</sup> We found that in the business world, the term ‘scaling up’ has become ubiquitous, where it emphasizes efficiency of expansion through lowering a product’s cost, thus increasing profit. In that context, it can be tied to historical forces, many invisible, that tend to privilege mechanistic and formulaic frameworks for expansion. In contrast, we explored how *other* frameworks for *scale*, such as those based on ecosystems, might better inform expansion efforts of organizations working to change social norms.<sup>4</sup> Before describing these discussions, however, we review our conversations about feminism and its background, conversations that took on more nuanced meanings in the context of scale.

<sup>b</sup> Batliwala, S. (2020). *All about movements: Why building movements creates deeper change*. CREA. [https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements\\_Web.pdf](https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements_Web.pdf)

<sup>a</sup>Where movement building has weakened, we see a far greater focus on implementing short-term projects and providing services. While these are certainly useful, they are often palliative, without a clear political agenda aimed at transforming gender and other social power relations in the longer term.”





## B Feminism

Feminism has essentially emerged over the years as a fundamental recognition of the injustice of patriarchy as a social norm, a socially devised construct, rather than as a universal given. Its proponents have questioned, challenged and revoked the assumption that men are 'by nature' superior to women. So, we start with a discussion of patriarchy.

### B1 Patriarchy

Patriarchy is one of the historical forces mentioned above that have shaped the world we all live and work in. For those of us working on gendered social norms change, it is perhaps one of the most visible of these forces: yet its continued influence on our lives and work often remains unrecognized and unchecked. It is an ideology that justifies powerfully ensconced systems—prevalent since prehistory--that postulates superiority of men and inferiority of women. To maintain this system, a set of beliefs and assumptions about male superiority came to be seen as taken-for-granted. Social practices follow from these including, for example, subjugation of and violence against women. Patriarchy ascribes to men control over decision-making in their societies, both at public, formal institutional level and in private, informal and relationships levels, in families and in communities. One of the key characteristics of social norms is that they are taken for granted: so much so by those who conform to them that they may not even really notice that they exist, let alone question them. To contextualize our work, it is important therefore to start by identifying and naming this context of patriarchy as an ideology supporting a basic social system which spawned inequitable gender norms and practices, across the millennia, and around the world, and which is still extremely forceful today.

- Patriarchy ascribes to men control over decision-making in their societies, both at public, formal institutional level and in private, informal and relationships levels, in families and in communities.



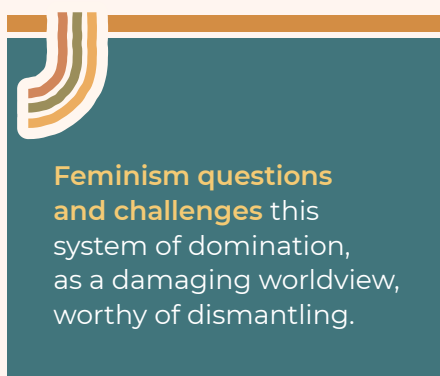


Patriarchy is still firmly embedded through justice systems, serving to reinforce the domination of men as ‘naturally given’ and creation and implementation of laws and adjudication processes are structured to curtail women’s lives. Legal systems of most countries still support both structural and interpersonal violence against women. In terms of structural violence, for example, working conditions and pay (or lack of it) for (largely female, often migrant) care workers remain poorly protected in most states.<sup>5</sup> In terms of interpersonal violence, authors in a recent article about the way in which the legal system perpetuates and legitimates male domination and violence against women in Uganda, for example, describe the thoroughgoing way the law works against women victims of domestic violence.



*“As in other contexts, the pervasive ideology of patriarchy enabled duty bearers to favor male power in relationships, making it easy for men to not appear when summoned, to be believed over the word of a woman, to ignore agreements reached in mediations, and to threaten women with repercussions for persisting with a case. Hurdles include those related to process, including the lack of confidential settings for disclosure of abuse; negative attitudes toward survivors, including minimizing the abuse they experience and blaming women; limited knowledge and skills to effectively handle domestic violence cases; lack of survivor protection or safety planning that extends to the backlash from family and community members who do not support her reporting the violence; unethical conduct, including discouraging women from pursuing justice and taking bribes from husbands; and charging women for services that should be provided through government funds.”<sup>6</sup>*

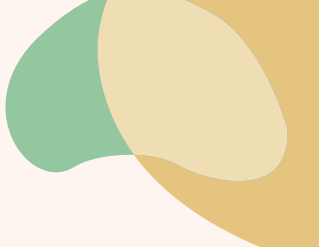
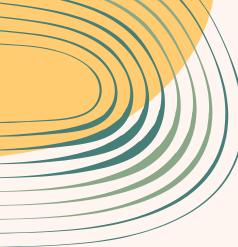
Feminism questions and challenges this system of domination, as a damaging worldview, worthy of dismantling. Our respective programs have enabled women and men to reflect on, challenge and revise the assumptions that have underpinned the power of patriarchal systems over women’s lives especially. Our programs have thus succeeded, in part at least, because they have supported people’s efforts to start to question the existing status quo and to construct a new world order, based on more equitable principles of mutual sharing, respect, empathy and understanding of the structural forces at play in everyone’s lives.



When considering the systemic predominance of patriarchy and efforts therefore needed to create an alternative, new world order, one can see that the conditions necessary for transformation take much preparation time to develop empathic and trustworthy relationships. Moreover, even though so widespread, patriarchy manifests itself differently in different contexts. So, no matter how well a program worked in one community to reduce patriarchy’s harmful effects on people’s







lives, the program cannot be uprooted and transplanted into another community without: a) a clear understanding of the spirit and thinking behind the methodology; and b) considerable preparatory knowledge of the new cultural and relational context. Yet, as we will see, neither of these conditions is currently widely prioritized.

## B2 The Term *Feminism*

During initial discussions, we explored our own uses of the term *feminism* itself. We noted that many of our critiques of the current ‘development agenda’ are shared by many other feminists working in ‘international development.’<sup>c</sup> We all place women and girls at the center of our work on gender equality, recognizing that transformation of power must take place. We all agreed that intersectionality and inclusiveness (of all people) have been critical to us and that this emphasis on feminist theory and activism has led to even more appreciation of cultural context. Some of our organizations champion the term *feminism* in public arenas while others have found more indirect approaches more practical, especially in communities where considerable misunderstandings of the term exist. All our organizations use the term with care, aware of the broader backlash, misunderstanding, and misleading appropriations of the term.

## B3 Emerging feminisms

Because of the effects of the predominant, largely Western model of feminism, voices of women from the Global South,<sup>7</sup> and of women from underrepresented communities in the Global North, have been silenced or overshadowed, but are now rising to the fore in thinking about and shaping feminism in ‘development activities.’<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, pro-feminist men are taking up what ‘feminisms’ inform their work to end violence against women and articulating basic principles central to being pro-feminist in their work.<sup>9</sup>

We have benefitted not only from current self-identified feminist thinkers and activists from the Global South but also from historical thought leaders.<sup>d</sup> For some of us who are women from the Global North in the CUSP group, our approaches to gendered social norms change program development have been shaped by our direct first-hand experiences of living amongst and working with people in diverse geographies with very different life experiences from ours. Such privileged experiences have enabled us to expand our world views, and, in turn, to reflect on and critique the inequitable social norms in our own societies through very different lenses from those we grew up with. For others, our experiences as feminists, as women challenging the status quo in our own contexts, prepared us for seeing what systemic sexism, racism and classism can do to maintain power relationships.

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<sup>c</sup> We include women such as Jessica Horn, Musimbi Kanyoro, Everjoyce Win; Gita Sen, Srilatha Batliwala, Tina Wallace, Andrea Cornwall, Titha Bhattacharya, among others.

<sup>d</sup> These include Audre Lourde, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Wangari Maathai, Paulo Freire, Pierre Bourdieu, Franz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, Antonio Gramsci, Nelson Mandela, Augusto Boal and others.



We recognize the strength of ‘working *with* communities’ and not ‘working *for* or *on* communities.’ These suggest profoundly different approaches.

All of us within CUSP, both as women from the Global South and North, recognize, for example, that the communities in which we live and work are not homogenous. We therefore appreciate the importance of understanding these inequalities, diversities and dynamics if we are to work effectively on social norms change.

Secondly, we recognize the strength of ‘working *with* communities’ and not ‘working *for* or *on* communities.’ These suggest profoundly different approaches. The former requires respect, understanding, time, commitment and more, to ensure that *community* members lead and own the processes and outcomes. We recognize this is not simply about how much *theory* we have gained through years of education, but also the *emotional intelligence* we have gained through the process, to understand, empathize and respect diverse community views and their respective roles in changing the status quo.<sup>10</sup>

The process has also enabled us all to recognize the important experience of being humbled by what we learn from others, continually reflecting and learning from each other. And for all of us, the CUSP space itself has allowed us as practitioners to use our voices to be heard and taken more seriously by various groups within this field of prevention of violence against women (VAW).<sup>11</sup>

## B4 How Conventional Approaches to Scale Up Can Trouble Feminist Programming

We begin this section quoting Tina Wallace, who succinctly stated how holding a feminist framework can put organizations at odds with the dominant framework employed in ‘international development’ in regard to funding:



*“Those holding on to alternative political values and associated ways of working that aim to address the structures of inequality – participatory ways of working, alliance building, long-term work with movements, and downward accountability – and reflect them in their practices are growing rarer. Rewards in terms of future funding and contracts do not usually focus on the quality of the relationships built, the relevance of the work to those most affected, or local assessments of what worked and did not work, but rather by achieving the expectations of the project framework, expressed in a few, often globally applied, metrics to which most local people and staff have not contributed.”<sup>12</sup>*




We are glad to see *some* changes around this set of issues beginning to emerge,<sup>13</sup> but many funders still determine the direction of their grantees' work. The more a funder understands the cultural realities within communities, the more they can understand the need for budget allocations for training, for example, and for infrastructural support for those local organizations already engaged in gender justice activities. But this is still the exception rather than the rule.<sup>14</sup>

Closely linked to the funding of programs' 'scale-up' is the evaluation process. Yet as Tina Wallace stated, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) within a feminist movement frame does not align well with externally defined M&E frames, which instead focus primarily on lists of outsider-generated, numbers-based observables. We discuss this further in Section E1.

We agreed that we wanted to try to understand better the origins of the disconnects between our shared CUSP perspectives on gendered social norms change scale, in the context of feminist programming, compared to other, more conventional approaches to scale. So, we decided to investigate the meaning of the term 'scale' itself and its own provenance.





## C An Examination of ‘Scale up’ as a Conceptual Metaphor

We thus formed a subcommittee to better investigate the concept of scale as it relates to feminism and social norms change, and to examine various conceptual metaphors that frame program expansion. Cognitive linguists and philosophers Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that most of our abstract concepts about the world are understood in terms of conceptual metaphors. They map a ‘source’ domain onto a ‘target’ domain. For example: “Good is up” is a spatialization metaphor (“I’m feeling up today.” “Things are looking up.”) Such metaphors are important because they bring with them entailments or characteristics of the ‘source’ domain to the ‘target’ domain. For example, *being up* is much better than *being down*: “I’m feeling *up* today.” “Her spirits *rose*.” “He *fell* into a depression.” “He’s *down* today.”

Conceptual metaphors are also powerful for how we understand abstractions because they originate in bodily experience: when we are sick, we lie down; when we are well, we are upright. These orientational metaphors are mapped onto other cultural experiences: “He’s on top of the situation.” “She’s moving up the social ladder.” Cultures share meanings through explicit and tacit use of conceptual metaphors which interrelate and carry values with them.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue that “*our unconscious conceptual system functions like a ‘hidden hand’ that shapes how we conceptualize all aspects of our experience.*”<sup>15</sup> Conceptual metaphors “*sanction actions, justify inferences, and help us set goals.*”<sup>16</sup> They come to constitute a meaning system and determine what is normal in our experiences.

One begins to see that, within a given culture, ‘scaling up’ is seen as natural, as good. Who wants to ‘scale down?’ It seems a no brainer. But is this the best metaphor to use to expand our work?

Using Lakoff’s and Johnson’s work, we examined the following three conceptual metaphors: *scale* (from geography and business), *diffusion* (from chemistry and anthropology), and growth within an *ecosystem* (from biology), and see fractals (from mathematics) as another possible metaphor.<sup>17</sup> Briefly, the scale metaphor derives from geography and concerns representation, usually of the level of detail in a database. The relationships are mathematical, as can be seen in the scale on the map (for instance, one centimeter equals 50 kilometers). The ‘scale’ metaphor in ‘international development’ relies on this: how



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**how can we take something that’s helping community X,** say in a pilot project, seen under magnification, and take it to scale, that is, to a larger geographic region or to reach more people in the same region.



can we take something that's helping community X, say in a pilot project, seen under magnification, and take it to scale, that is, to a larger geographic region or to reach more people in the same region. The standard definition of scale reads:

“Deliberate efforts to increase the impact of innovations successfully tested in pilot or experimental projects so as to benefit more people and to foster policy and program development on a lasting basis.”<sup>18</sup>

But this apparently straightforward definition of scale has given way to the use of the term *scale up* in the business world, where one additional entailment has been added: scaling is not just reaching more customers but *doing so for less*, that is, magnifying or achieving ‘economies of scale,’ or ensuring ‘more bang for the buck,’ as many are heard to say. Language about scale from the for-profit world has subtly infiltrated the world of non-profit, development initiatives, as something to aspire to. Typical in the for-profit literature are descriptions such as this:

“The key difference with growth is that scale is achieved by increasing revenue without incurring significant costs. While adding customers and revenue exponentially, costs should only increase incrementally, if at all.”<sup>19</sup>

To reach scale, a business frequently ‘manufactures’ a ‘product,’ to expand its markets and sales and increase profits, with more efficiency through reduced cost per production of each item.

Even though many ‘development efforts’ now eschew ‘outside expert’ models of intervention (e.g., Doing Development Differently,<sup>20</sup> and Time to Decolonize Aid),<sup>21</sup> pressures to scale something that looks and performs like ‘a product’ continue— packaged and disseminated in ever more efficient, cost-cutting ways, and sometimes described as akin to a business franchise.

The scale-up model, then, holds a set of interrelated inferences. Think, for example, about what is being ‘scaled up:’ a project has worked well in a given context and now must be ‘extracted out of its context’ for use in other contexts. In the extraction process, ‘something’ has to be made available in a way that it can be transported (a nutrition supplement, a vaccine, a process/training manual) and, usually, external agents are trained to reproduce/adapt/implant the project in new contexts. Those trained are rarely part of the original team and have not been through the pilot. The training



itself is an extraction from successful practices on the ground. The scaling process easily becomes bureaucratized as new trainers and an M&E team must be ‘supervised;’ and to the extent the program is subsumed into government or other NGOs, the project must be tailored to meet bureaucratic conditions in those organizations – which can often intentionally further exclude or delay matters related to women’s rights. As Kelsey Piper (2018) noted and what we have found in many attempts to scale our programs: “A lot can be lost in transmission.”<sup>22</sup>

The worldview that ‘scale up’ resides in is a powerful one; calling into question the nature of ‘scaling up’ at all can appear unduly radical. We found it critical in our explorations to detail the forces that come together to justify what frequently becomes an extraction approach to scale up, to illustrate the challenges that face us as we re-imagine a more fruitful way of conceptualizing scale. In contrast to the business use, we considered instead the metaphor ‘growth in an ecosystem,’ one that we have found more helpful, which we will describe later.

We also recognized that this business scale metaphor, derived from geography and mathematics, holds power because it did not just appear from a vacuum and, through language, works at a sub-conscious level to guide and influence us all. We decided therefore to delve deeper, to explore its roots more explicitly. So, the subcommittee examined various historical forces behind the conventional thinking about scale in ‘development’ efforts, mentioned above. We proceeded by exploring close ties not only to patriarchy, but also to 16<sup>th</sup> century European geographic expansion, subsequent colonialism, and what has transpired since.



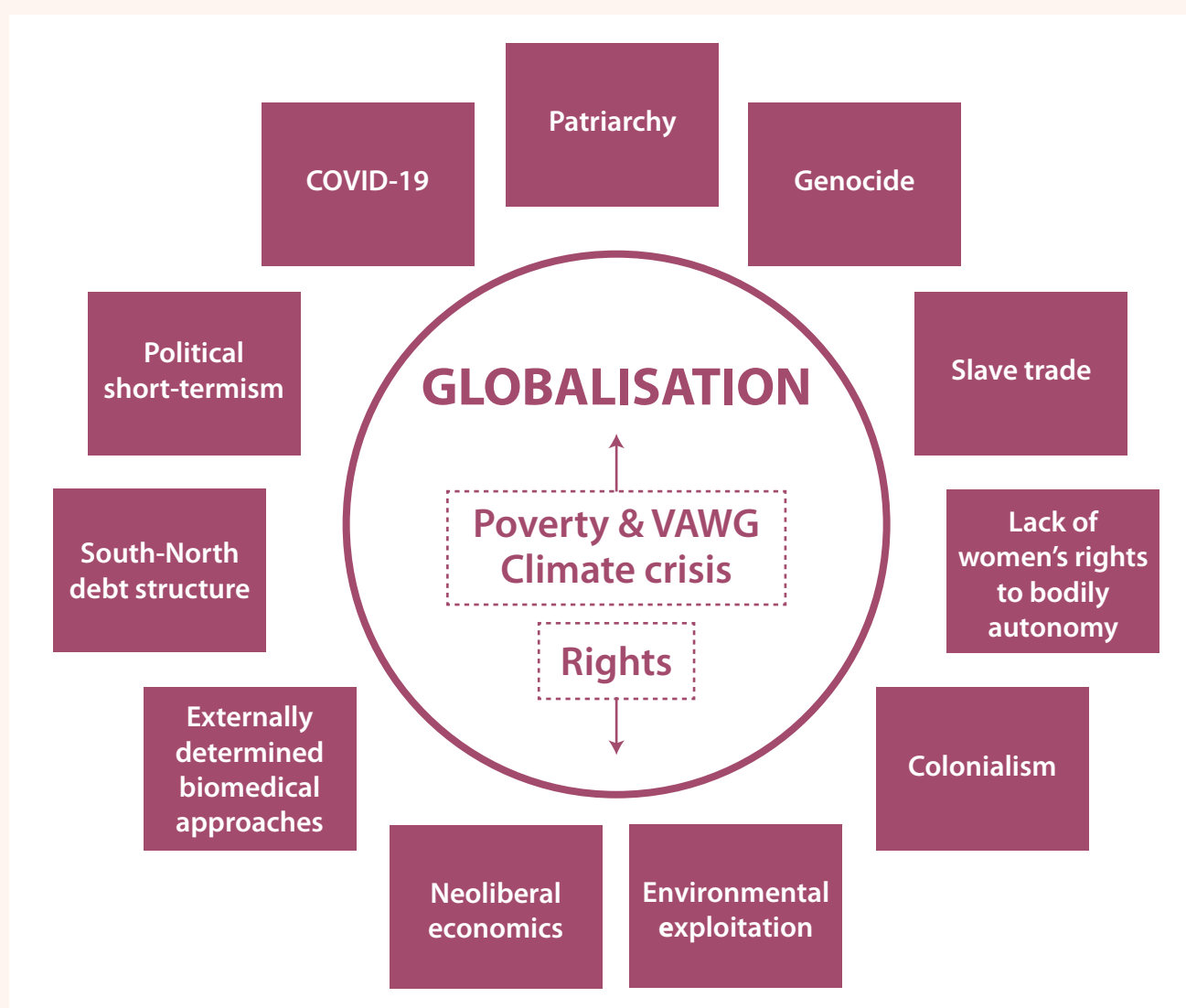
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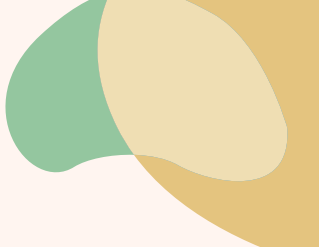
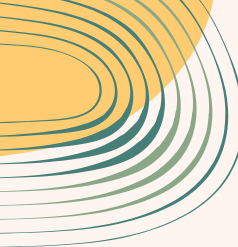
## D The Geo-Historical Context

Our work takes place against a geo-political, cultural and historical background that we have inherited and continue to reproduce, yet often forget about, overlook or ignore. Alongside patriarchy, discussed above, the words in the squares below (Diagram 2) name some of the other main features and forces that shape our work—make it necessary—and undermine it. Together these features and forces have informed the social norms that still are held in place. It is important to remember that social norms are about an individual's relationships with others around them and are thus embedded in their 'reference network' and in relation to who does and who does not hold power, in and beyond

**Diagram 2 – CUSP Model of Some Key Geo-Political Social Norms and Events which Have Shaped Current Dominant International 'Development' Theory and Practice**







the reference group. They are present informally, not just in communities but also, formally, in both the constitutions and structures of many national and international organizations themselves. The forces we describe below continue to influence ‘development’ work, governments which give and receive that work, philanthropists who support it, and communities that are its intended recipients.<sup>e</sup>

We point to these systems and their histories because they inform and affect our work, frequently invisibly. Yet they regularly combine to lead to unhealthy tensions among donors, governments, communities, for profit-, and non-profit organizations, such as those we represent, working to reduce violence against women. We find this subtle shaping to be especially significant in discussions about *scaling* where assumptions based in for-profit corporate practices drive priorities and funding decisions.

In contrast to this history, feminist scale reimagines what growth might look like and, we argue later, leads to sustainable and vital partnerships. But first, we look briefly at each of these historical forces in turn.

## D1 European Expansion, Genocide, Enslavement, Colonialism and Racism

Within a discussion of patriarchy, one must recognize racism as a pervasive characteristic of social systems and institutions. It validated European expansionist ideologies from the fifteenth century onwards. One early global historical example of expansion (often seen at the time as scale up or spread of European ‘culture’ and its Christian message to benefit others), involved so-called ‘voyages of discovery.’ Often these were blessed by royalty and Christian leaders to validate them and led to European conquest and settlement of the ‘New World.’ They used genocide (through military hardware), transportation of enslaved peoples, and mass rape of women and girls, to settle, extract precious minerals and timber, grow produce and transport it to satisfy ever-growing European desires for ‘exotic’ goods. Expansion of extraction of resources, people and products, at no or minimal cost, was the norm. Business, the law, politics, and religion were effectively combined to validate these immense rights violations, as they are now recognized. Thus, racist and sexist attitudes and practices of those in power were essentially justified as the ‘natural, moral’ order by political and religious leaders, through their seeking to ‘civilize’ and ‘save the souls’ of those whom they conquered.

The resulting damage is extensively documented, establishing racism’s critical role in vast accumulations of colonial wealth. Some have articulated very clearly how colonization included exploitation, enslavement and colonization of *women’s* bodies in these countries **also**.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a deep acknowledgment of how racism and patriarchy intersect becomes imperative for realigning power and privilege in the context of social norms change.<sup>24</sup>

Where business opportunities first abounded, colonialism soon followed, as legal ownership by European empires further laid claim to lands and people across Latin America, Africa and South and South-East Asia, bolstered with further proclamations about the vast benefits that accrued for

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<sup>e</sup> For a video of a play performed by Zambian actors on development’s failed projects, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qs7UTX5eEEU>



colonialized populations to be governed by 'civilized' states. The 'scramble for Africa' ensued, with borders being drawn across maps in European capitals, with no recognition of the rights of those who lived there to their own lands, goods or resources. Patriarchy, racism and colonialism have thus fundamentally shaped global economic, legal and social systems.

We remind ourselves of all this here because these effects of colonialism continue today. The very development institutions which seek to 'scale up' violence against women prevention and response programs globally are now becoming increasingly aware of their own deeply embedded socially ascribed norms of patriarchal and race-based hierarchies of power, perceptions of moral and cultural superiority. They are realizing that the rights and voices of people in the Global **South** are often harmed, violated, and muted; and that funds for their work are commonly spent by others before ever reaching those they are intended to support.<sup>25</sup> But before we look at current institutional practices in more depth, we discuss the philosophical rationale which underpinned European expansion, as well as much of the ongoing Western scientific method today.

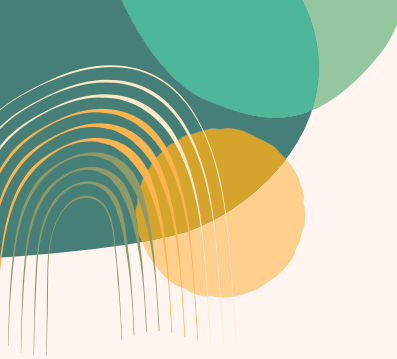
- The very development institutions which seek to 'scale up' violence against women prevention and response programs globally are now becoming increasingly aware of their own deeply embedded socially ascribed norms of patriarchal and race-based hierarchies of power, perceptions of moral and cultural superiority.

## D2 The Western Philosophical Legacy

The process of expansion, colonialization, and greater control of the world by European powers described above stems from a Western worldview known as the "Enlightenment" and its leading philosophers. These thinkers, including Decartes<sup>26</sup> and Bacon, sought to rationalize the world, using religious texts including the Christian Bible to validate the placing of 'man,' separate from, above, and in control of, a 'natural' hierarchy, resulting in a structured reductionist approach to 'objectification' and reification of the world through what has become known as the Western scientific method. The 'Enlightenment' encouraged energetic social, scientific and political action. It justified the thirst for expansion, control, extraction and new knowledge, described above; and supported European states' effective expansion of their economic and political (as well as religious) power, control, assumptions of **superiority**,<sup>27</sup> markets – and sources of raw materials for their citizens' consumption – around the world.

Hand in hand with the development of the belief in Western superiority and domination, the Western scientific method focused on documenting and controlling the 'natural' world through objectifying





it. Its proponents developed taxonomies, hierarchies, quantitative measurements, collections and categorizations of plants, minerals, animals, diseases, and people. Keeping ‘tropical diseases,’ such as malaria and dengue fever under control, so that people could work, also became critical to the success of the empire-building process.<sup>28</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, institutions such as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine<sup>29</sup> developed to prevent, treat and measure these diseases.<sup>f30</sup> In line with the Western scientific model, they sought to manage, control and contain tropical diseases, through externally determined, biomedical models of disease control, which are focused very much on clinical categorizations of individual diseases, rather than on the people who experience them, in a very siloed way.<sup>31</sup> We explore later how these historical approaches to disease in the Global South, with their roots in keeping colonial labor at work and colonial officers healthy, still have ramifications today.

First however we look at neoliberalism, the next historical step in the process we are charting. We include this because neoliberalism has had a profound effect on current international development processes and strategies, including those for scale-up. We see direct links between neoliberal policies and increasing challenges for women, including increasing domestic violence levels. We need to understand this influence before we can think about possible alternative ways of taking gendered norms change programs to scale, that might be more effective.

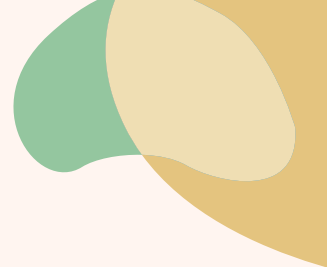
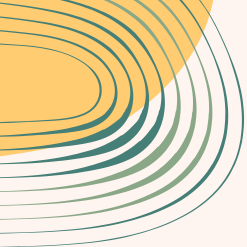
## D3 Neoliberalism

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, neoliberalism has shaped the foreign and domestic economic policies of the Western World, including ‘international development.’ In this section, we discuss neoliberalism because it is not often or widely recognized how neoliberalist policies have had a direct effect on women’s lives, safety, health and well-being. We explore later how there is a direct correlation between Gross Domestic Product (GDP), (a product of neoliberalism), by which a country’s economic development is measured, and how much a country invests in its people’s healthcare, for instance. This can often affect women especially, as they struggle to find funds for their children’s and their own healthcare and related transport, time and other expenses.<sup>9</sup> We will see how all *unpaid* work, including childbearing and rearing, looking after babies, children, sick people and elderly, as well as household tasks etc., most of which is done by women alone, falls outside GDP and is not included in

<sup>f</sup> One example of this – in Richard Burton’s account of travelling in Somalia, dated 1856, he described in passing in a footnote how Somalis believe that mosquitoes bring fevers (<https://burtoniana.org/books/1856-First%20Footsteps%20in%20East%20Africa/1856-FirstFootstepsVer2.htm>). At that time, Europeans thought that malaria was caused literally by ‘bad air’ (malaria). But ‘officially,’ the LSHTM website describes how Ronald Ross discovered that the anopheles mosquito transmits malaria 30 years later, on 20 August 1887, when working as a doctor in the Indian Medical Service – and was awarded the Nobel Prize and knighted for his discovery. <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/research/research-action/lshtm-120/historical-timeline>

<sup>9</sup> Chang, A. Y., Cowling, K., Micah, A. E., Chapin, A., Chen, C. S., Ikilezi, G., ... & Qorbani, M. (2019). Past, present, and future of global health financing: a review of development assistance, government, out-of-pocket, and other private spending on health for 195 countries, 1995–2050. *The Lancet*, 393(10187), 2233–2260.

*[Between 1995 and 2016]...[t]he smallest increase in government health spending per capita was in low-income countries, especially in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; in these regions, economic development was the leading factor contributing to this growth..... The strong relationship between GDP and health spending suggests that supporting economic development in the poorest countries is an important approach for improving equity in health financing across countries. There are many examples of countries that have substantially increased health spending as their economies have grown. Still, there are other important cases where countries have increased health spending much faster than their economic growth. These countries, such as China, South Korea, and Cuba, highlight what is possible with political will and investments in health.*



the estimate. So global and national economic policies focus on keeping a paid workforce productive, but exclude policies which would improve unpaid workers' lives. This disconnect between how progress is measured in a country and the realities of women's lives, means that countries, especially since the Global Credit Crisis, have seen a reduced investment in health systems; and increased pressure on people to produce more for less pay, or higher levels of unemployment. Such pressures often result in greater domestic violence, as we are also seeing from climate change and COVID-19.

Neoliberalism<sup>h</sup> is a predominant ideology of economic development, often espoused by the most powerful countries and corporations over the last decades.<sup>i</sup> Neoliberalist policy depends on ever-expanding markets, so that a country continues to increase its GDP. The economic expansion of a country is still the fundamental measurement of its 'developing' status today.<sup>j</sup> The basic principle is still 'growth = good.' So what relevance is this to us here? It is closely connected to the whole concept of 'international development' from the latter's outset.

'International development' was a term first coined in 1949 in President Truman's inauguration speech, as a public relations exercise.<sup>32</sup> This popular concept conceptualized 'development' as US global goodwill, whilst also enabling economic expansion, through continuing to ensure global economic market growth for the USA. 'International development' was also viewed by some as a way to replace the failures of colonialism<sup>k</sup> as many countries sought to gain their independence from Western colonial powers and influences. We will return to this later.

In the late 1960s, a sudden unexpected surplus in Western banks' funds resulted in the idea to loan them out to countries in the Global South, with compound interest debt repayment schedules.<sup>33</sup> One great irony of this is that, at that time, the economic well-being of countries such as Ghana (which became independent in 1957), was actually increasing and the economic gap between the Global North and the Global South, in terms of gross domestic product, was actually narrowing. However, when this new North / South debt strategy was set up by the Western powers, the gap between

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<sup>h</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). *Neoliberal*. Dictionary.cambridge.org. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/neoliberal>  
Neoliberal means: "supporting a large amount of freedom for markets, with little government control or spending, and low taxes."

<sup>i</sup> British Library. (2013). Frederick Winslow Taylor: Father of Scientific Management Thinker. *The British Library*. <https://doi.org/https://www.bl.uk/people/frederick-winslow-taylor>

Neoliberalism grew in turn out of the early 1900s emergence of 'economics' as a new, supposedly objective, scientific discipline, separate from the study of moral philosophy and political economy, where it had previously been placed. This discipline was created at Harvard Business School among others. It was connected to the work of Frederick Taylor, Henry Ford and other industrialists, who developed 'scientific management,' seeking to scale up mass-production of goods. This enabled factory production methods to be broken up into objective mathematical units, in order to see where profit margins could improve through reducing the 'natural laziness' of factory workers.

<sup>j</sup> Ironically, the term 'developing countries' has always referred to countries which are not part of the OECD (also nowadays referred to as High Income Countries). It has not included other measures to compare countries, such as quality of care for the elderly, an area in which many would argue that it is OECD countries, where the widespread practices of institutionalization of elderly care, which need development. By contrast, people in Low Income and Middle-Income countries, and many migrant communities in High Income Countries still live in multi-generational households and consider residential care homes an inhumane practice.

<sup>k</sup> Those who have written about the deep challenges of colonialism include indigenous Native American philosopher Jack Forbes (<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/the-red-and-the-black-remembering-the-legacy-of-jack-d-forbes>); and Aimé Césaire (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/aimae-fernand-caesaire>) from Martinique.



these countries actually started to widen again, and has continued to widen exponentially ever since.<sup>1</sup>

We hope it is clear by now that neoliberal economics grew out of the geo-political forces described above, based on strong assumptions and social norms which are still rarely recognized or acknowledged. These include an ongoing focus on a continued, supposedly apolitical, business scale-up model: the continued imperative to increase GDP year on year: the key economic measure seen as a country's successful measure of progress. These norms also include an assumption that business and profit-making have a natural priority over social justice and equity, with expectations that expanded markets would somehow mitigate any sufferings caused, in a trickle-down effect.

This was because, **instead of countering the legacies of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism described earlier**, neoliberalism created a new means by which the fortunes of non-OECD countries became shackled once more to Western Powers.

However, whilst the idea of economic scale-up and expansion (i.e. unlimited growth = prosperity for all) has understandable appeal, as explained earlier, this policy of neoliberal economics and its attendant North-South debt structure, was a blow not only to the economic gains but also to the liberation work of many newly independent states. This was because, instead of countering the legacies of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism described earlier, it created a new means by which the fortunes of non-OECD countries became shackled once more to Western Powers. So, just as 'expanding markets = prosperity for all' is an attractive assumption but one that needs close **scrutiny**,<sup>34</sup> so the related belief that 'scaling up development programs = good for all,' built on this neoliberal assumption, also needs careful review.

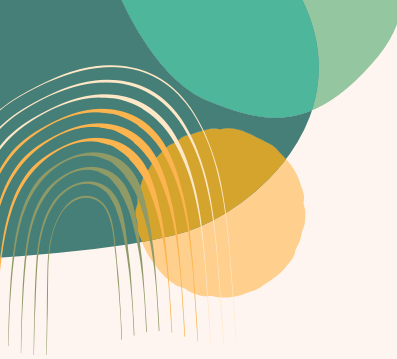
Now we return to the effects of neoliberalism on women's lives. Some would still argue that neoliberalism has made life better for women, since it has brought increasing flexibility of the labor market, which enabled more women to enter paid labor. This strategy has been described as 'smart economics.'<sup>35</sup> However, it is increasingly recognized that this is not so. Indeed, most women have joined the informal or part-time labor sector, which has limited workers' rights, long working hours, and poor remuneration.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, their employment just exacerbates their burden of care, since they are still expected to meet the unpaid labor demands in their households. For many women, keeping the balance between paid employment and unpaid housework can actually worsen their quality of life and contribute to domestic violence. Just increasing the quantity of paid work for women without exploring first with them their working conditions, or recognizing the consequences on their quality of life, is not an adequate response.<sup>m</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many working in the field of 'development' do not know that the World Bank, which "*help[s] countries share and apply innovative knowledge and solutions to the challenges they face*" also publishes a regularly updated 'Doing Business' report (<https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/reports/global-reports/doing-business-2020>). This lists which countries have the most relaxed labor laws, to enable companies to decide in which country they could produce goods with the largest economic profit margins. Hickel describes, in a case from Eswatini, relevant to our discussion, how this meant that thousands of female garment workers in textile factories found that they were made redundant as their employers shifted production to South-East Asia, where costs of production were cheaper and labor laws were more relaxed. Women in Eswatini were rapidly forced to find alternative forms of income to pay their bills. These included unregulated transactional sex, which increased their physical and sexual vulnerabilities to violence and ill-health, and reduced their financial security. Similar stories are found around the world. (<https://www.jasonhickel.org/the-divide>)

<sup>m</sup> "The struggle for women to reconcile [unpaid] care responsibilities with paid employment can lead to "occupational downgrading," where women choose employment below their skills level and accept poorer conditions (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). In addition, part-time employment and the informal sector are another alternative for women although this has negative long-term implications in terms of reduced superannuation contributions and retirement incomes (when available)." [https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid\\_care\\_work.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf)







Furthermore, at state level, far from making economies better in loan-recipient countries, because of the compound interest imposed on loans, the size of debt now owned by countries across the Global South means that all loans to them are used to contribute just to servicing interest on the debts owed, rather than any repayment of the debts themselves. In effect, the interest to be paid on the debts has far outstripped the original debts. This means that countries in the Global South will *never* be able to pay off these debts. This is one reason why they *must* go on growing their economies – i.e. to increase their gross domestic product (GDP), in a vicious cycle, year after year. Unless and until these debts are written off, the Global South is forever in hock to the World Bank, and other northern economic powers.<sup>n</sup>



And even if scaling up social norms change programs worked as planned, they cannot fix the problem when its cause is so large, so structurally embedded in the policies of states, Western institutions and multinational companies, and is so far removed from community members' hands.

Again, with increasing commodification and privatization of basics such as food,<sup>37</sup> water and cooking fuel, there is ever-increasing pressure on women to find money to buy these for their families. If they do not, they are, in turn, increasingly vulnerable to domestic violence. So the focus on market forces and commodification is actually making domestic violence worse rather than alleviating it.<sup>38</sup> And even if scaling up social norms change programs worked as planned, they cannot fix the problem when its cause is so large, so structurally embedded in the policies of states, Western institutions and multinational companies, and is so far removed from community members' hands.<sup>39</sup>

Even if neoliberalism per se does *not* have the huge consequences described here, given the concerns raised with regards to women's quality of life, it would still seem fitting to explore whether this 'growth' model of scale-up is appropriate for effective, ethical and sustainable social norms change.

<sup>n</sup> Some argue, rightly, that many leaders in the Global South have huge personal fortunes; and that they have invested hugely in their military power, for instance. However, two wrongs never make a right and this should never enable the Global North powers to be absolved of their own responsibilities; It is also important to remember that all unpaid care work – having children, care of children, sick people and the elderly, and unpaid food preparation, fuelwood and water collection, health center visits and housework – i.e. mainly work done by women – is all *excluded* from GDP estimates. So women's vast contributions to the economies of all countries globally are not recognised in economic estimates, policies or strategies.

<https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/womensadvancement/community/2018/06/21/how-not-to-write-about-african-women-and-development>



## D4 The Drive for Good

As mentioned earlier, although the term ‘international development’ itself was first coined by Truman, the context out of which ‘international development’ projects originated did of course reflect a primary desire on the part of some, at least, to respond to the dire conditions created by colonialism and many international development organizations began around this time. One dimension of this response was the emergence and, over time, considerable growth of many of these non-profit organizations and the creation of large for-profit international development corporations.<sup>40</sup> Their growth has often been in response to their dependence, in turn, on government aid grants which demand that they lessen global poverty and gender-based violence with a model of services delivery based on ‘product-based’ thinking (like producing and distributing vaccines or seat belts or workbooks) that can be “*brought to scale*.”

By contrast, the literature we cite throughout this article argues that social norms change does *not* happen through such a process. Although these large entities portray, in principle, their willingness to address the social ills brought about by colonialism, their structures and funding bases just do not enable them to align with the requirements for a community-led process for achieving effective and sustainable scale-up of social norms transformation approaches.

We explain more about the consequences of these challenges for others’ scaling of our programs in [Section E](#).

## D5 Measuring ‘Progress’

Our discussions also explored how the emphasis on economic calculations went hand in hand with evidence-based evaluation in the social sciences. These in turn were influenced by positivist epistemology in the philosophy of science.<sup>41</sup> We observed how this is manifested not only in terms of size (the number of people) reached by a program, but also in the way of conceptualizing the outcomes in terms of observable and measurable evidence. We explored the ways that evidence is understood and might be influenced by the economic models and epistemological assumptions at work in the background.

Since the emergence of the concept of ‘international development’ described above, *measurement* of ‘development’ has been dominated by calculations that could be performed by specialists, who designated features of the observable<sup>42</sup> world as legitimate for what is now termed evidence-based evaluation. Current common practices continue to ascribe most weight to numbers which can more easily be measured, where methods such as cost effectiveness, and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) tend to hold sway. In these practices, note that “bigger” and “more” are better and that outcomes can be measured quantitatively. The dominance of randomized control trials, and systematic reviews of such trials, as the ‘gold standard’ applied to clinical research, has been promoted and is upheld by the World Health Organization<sup>43</sup> and others. However, these describe the ‘what,’ rather than the ‘how’ or ‘why’ and are not well suited to assessing social change. See Section E1 for more on this point.

Despite its great holistic overall definition of health, created at its inception in 1948 and enshrined in its constitution,<sup>44</sup> in practice the WHO mandate is limited to health systems strengthening through





technical support and guidance to Ministries of Health around the world. With some exceptions, such as WHO's specific work on violence against women,<sup>45</sup> WHO's structure and main focus is on disease, rather than on the people who have them. Considering their substantial resources and influence, WHO could do much more to address the gendered dimensions of disease prevention, treatment and care as a whole. Two recent articles, one about WHO's lack of gendered policies, practices and preparedness for global health emergencies;<sup>46</sup> and another about the urgent need for gender mainstreaming in UN agencies in **general**,<sup>47</sup> emphasize this. Indeed, in general, WHO tends to take a siloed approach to disease, with little focus on or funding of how different socio-economic determinants of health combine to affect women. For example, there is very limited attention to the intersectionalities of violence against women combined with STIs, unplanned pregnancy, HIV, mental health issues and sexual and reproductive health and rights violations in general, even though the socio-economic dimensions of poverty and ill-health are widely recognized in gendered social norms change work.<sup>o</sup>

As we see later, such siloed approaches to disease and quantitative approaches to program measurement have their consequences in terms of M&E of effective gendered social norms change programming.

## D6 The Anthropocene and COVID

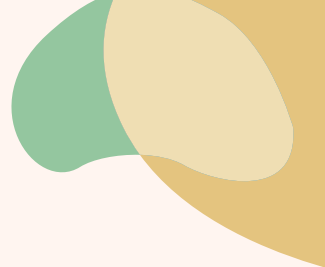
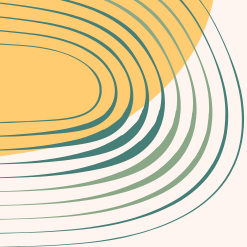
Neoliberal economics and its powerful influence on global industrialization are recognized by researchers to be directly contributing to climate change, the next force on our chronometer. During our 2020 discussions, we witnessed devastating events caused by climate change. Existing programs were frequently disrupted by these weather extremes. The constant pressure to grow GDP forces evermore extraction and destruction of natural 'resources,' causing degraded ecosystems,<sup>48</sup> which also enable diseases, as well as the social determinants of ill-health, to flourish. This is exacerbating people's poverty and ill health, causing large-scale internal displacements<sup>p</sup> and contributing to a lack of economic wherewithal. Even before climate change affected people's access to food, the hungry season provoked increased domestic violence.<sup>49</sup> Climate change and concomitant extreme weather conditions only serve to increase women's experiences of violence.<sup>50</sup> Maintaining the status quo, will worsen pollution, promote the extraction of more resources: and result in even more violence. Hence the urgent imperative for all of us involved in work on violence against women globally *also* to support the creation of new global economic structures that will instead produce more global economic and gender-equitable stability and environmental health. Yet most of these consequences are so far mostly felt in the Global South, so the urgency of this need for change is still not yet sufficiently realized by Western powers and funders.

COVID-19 has been another wake-up call and important for those of us considering effective ways of scaling approaches that address gender equity. Scientists indicate that global health events

<sup>o</sup> The WHO 2017 Guideline on SRHR of women living with HIV is an exception to this, but its recommendations remain largely excluded from other policy documents. [https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/gender\\_rights/srhr-women-hiv/en/](https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/gender_rights/srhr-women-hiv/en/)

<sup>p</sup> *Economic Contexts: Neoliberalism, Climate Crisis and Care Economies*. (2021, February 17). [Www.youtube.com. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxzZ44uF-\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxzZ44uF-_0) It is important to distinguish between 'economic displacement' through commercial companies developing tobacco or shrimp agriculture, with those in power using climate change as an excuse to do so, and genuine displacement through climate change.





**COVID has also revealed starkly how local networks of women** and others in countless communities around the world have stepped to the fore to support each other, creating vital food and medicine distribution networks, where government and NGO staff have been withdrawn. Yet they have been able to access little or no funding for this fundamental work.

like this are also exacerbated by climate change,<sup>66</sup> since cross-species virus jumps are more likely to occur in more stressed environments. COVID in itself, and the resulting lockdown, have brought all kinds of challenges to everyone around the world, though the type and magnitude of these challenges reflected and exacerbated existing inequities, as the UN Secretary General has pointed out.<sup>51</sup> We have seen how domestic violence has increased in turn in every context.<sup>52</sup> There are also related mental health issues, food shortages, burden of care for women, lack of work and income, and many other interconnected challenges. Yet COVID has also revealed starkly how local networks of women and others in countless communities around the world have stepped to the fore to support each other, creating vital food and medicine distribution networks, where government and NGO staff have been withdrawn. Yet they have been able to access little or no funding for this fundamental work.

With countries in the Global North also badly affected by COVID-19, there is more awareness among donors based in these countries of the enormity of the effects of COVID on women's lives and levels of violence against them. Most funders have recognized that business as usual is no longer the best option, or even possible. However, we have still heard of some funders insisting that grant recipients conduct sessions to fulfil grant requirements, despite potential social distancing risks for the participants. And one major donor has slashed its budget drastically when the funds have never been more needed. However, some others have been very accommodating in response to this ongoing crisis.

## D7 Political Leadership

To expand social norms change programs, partnerships with governments over time become critical. And yet, in most countries, we also face the challenge of political short-termism, where democratic countries have limited terms of office for elected representatives. In the US, for example, there is a general election and a national election across the states every four years. In India the limit is up to five years. Whilst we all agree the importance and value of holding free and fair elections regularly, to ensure that we hold our elected representatives to account, this also means that elected representatives often find it difficult to look beyond their short-term goal of wanting to get re-elected. And in many countries, leaders hold on to power for many years, either with no elections or ones which others do not consider free or fair. Either way, the status quo reigns, oppositions parties are often undermined and women's rights are kept in check.<sup>53</sup>

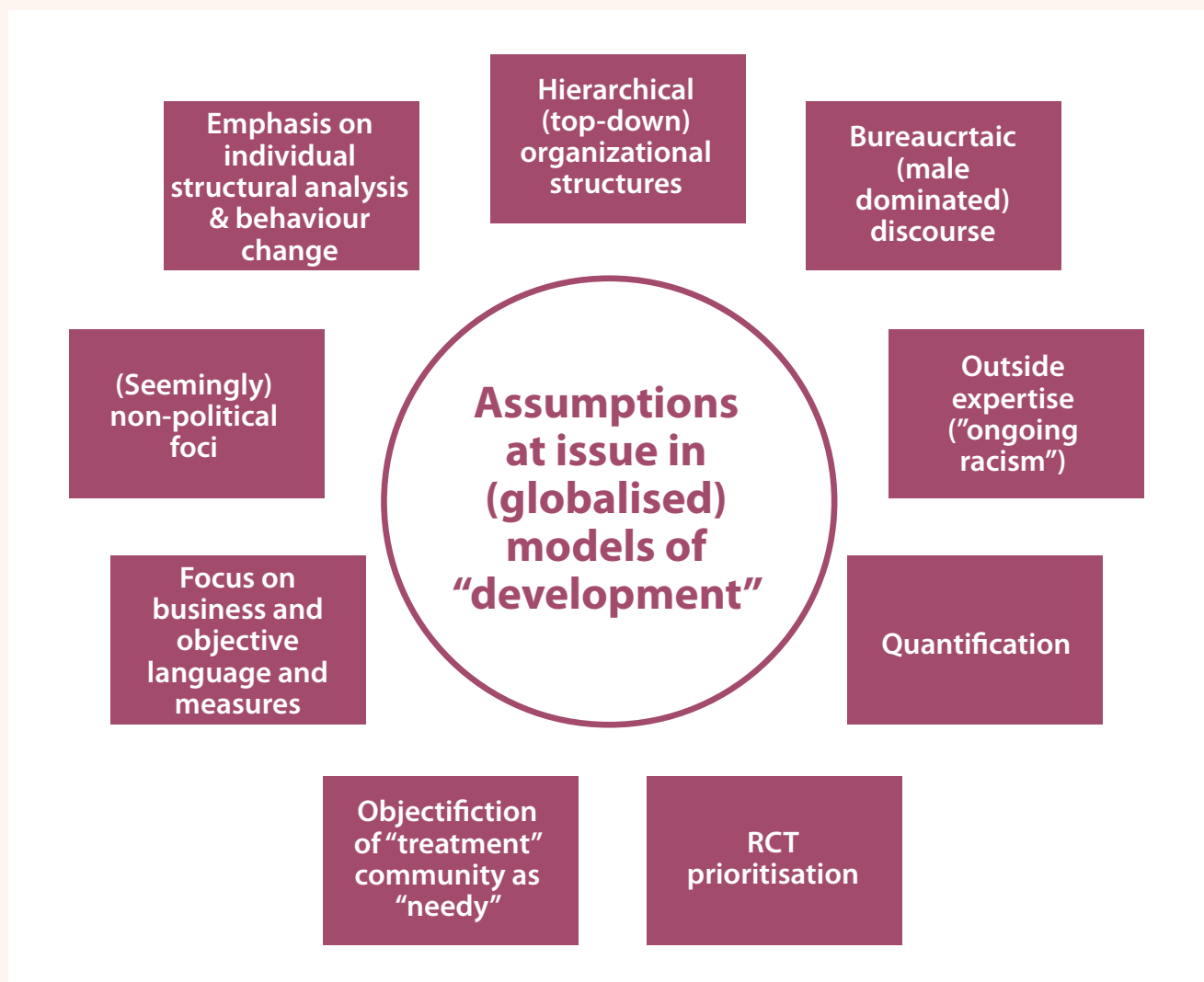
This means that more radical changes such as increase in taxes of the rich, or reduction in fossil fuel usage are very difficult policies for politicians to promote because they fear that if they do so too much, that they will not then get enough political support from their business communities, who are driven by the demand for constant growth of GDP, to get them re-elected.



## E How This ‘Perfect Storm’ has Influenced the ‘International Development’ Model

In our CUSP discussions we looked next at how all the factors described in Section D above, a ‘perfect storm,’ have combined to influence the dominant ‘international development’ model paradigm of the last 70 years or so.

**Diagram 3 – CUSP Perspective on Some Current Dominant Perspectives Shaped by the Elements of Diagram 2**





## E1 Some Consequences of the Perfect Storm for ‘International Development’ Work

Diagram 3 highlights some key elements that we identified of current dominant narratives regarding ‘international development.’ They are by no means exhaustive. Here we briefly discuss each one.

**Structures:** We note how top-down hierarchical organizational structures exist, whereby donors, researchers and implementing agencies are largely located in the Global North, whilst operating in the Global South.<sup>54</sup> We see these institutions largely created and, often still led by white men, with a white, male-dominant discourse, based on assumptions that expertise is located in these institutions in the Global North.

**Quantification:** We see a predominant focus on the apparent superiority of reductive interpretations of quantification, or excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques alone, to solve the world’s problems. Especially something to notice in practice is that what can be quantified is what is considered significant: what can be counted is often considered to be all that matters.

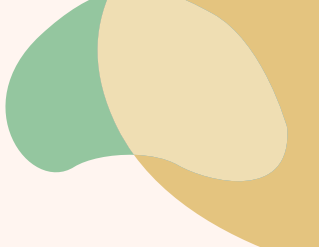
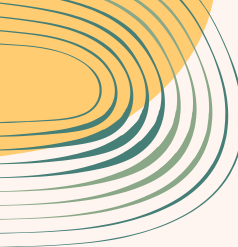
We have seen how Western global health organizations, governments and research institutions have taken their evaluation models from phenomena that can be reduced to particular components (e.g., diseases and specific behaviors) in order to design and test treatments. In other words, there is a strong tendency to apply theories, methods and approaches rooted in clinical models which, while they may be appropriate for understanding some phenomena (e.g., efficacy of pharmaceuticals), are not well suited to understanding behavior and social change.

**Randomized Control Trials:** Use of randomized control trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews is rightly and greatly valued for objective trials of drugs and vaccines in a laboratory.<sup>55</sup> However, these measurement methods are not as useful when aiming to evaluate holistic outcomes such as community well-being and abandoning harmful social norms. For example, WHO’s guideline development handbook<sup>59</sup> explains how such research methodologies are far more suited to ‘what’ might work, rather than to ‘how’ or ‘why,’ which often reflect the psycho-social issues related to people’s experiences.

Although some funders are committed to investment in research to understand the ‘processes’ of change, policy decisions and priority setting, especially about what programs to scale up, is often skewed toward quantitative and scientific experimental measures. So there is also comparatively little focus on, or funding for, challenges which cannot be so readily quantified,

“Although some funders are committed to investment in research to understand the ‘processes’ of change, policy decisions and priority setting, especially about what programs to scale up, is often skewed toward quantitative and scientific experimental measures.





such as sexual and reproductive rights violations or violence against women and girls. The lack of funding for understanding *how* change happens, whether the intended consequences of such change occur, and what – possibly negative or positive – ‘unintended’ consequences occur, arguably causes huge problems in relation to a lack of recognition of the ‘human’ element, and of the role of people’s own views, perspectives and social norms, in relation to poverty and ill health in particular.

**Objectification through language:** Widespread usage of militaristic metaphors in the terminology of evaluations of scaled programs also adds to an objectification of the community to be studied. People in communities are described as ‘target groups,’ ‘beneficiaries’ or, at best, ‘clients,’ and are normally portrayed as having needs, rather than having their own priorities and agency. This objectification<sup>14</sup> implies that they have little inherent knowledge, experience, expertise or self-determination. ‘Interventions’ are designed to deliver over-simplistic ‘treatments,’ with language such as ‘campaigns,’ ‘impact’ ‘targets,’ ‘cohorts’ and ‘elimination.’

**Business models:** We also see how major donors have an in-built business-oriented model of success, which uses this language and focuses on short-term project cycles, quantitative ‘targets’ or results and evaluation of ‘impact’ of these scaled programs in a supposedly apolitical environment. Their grantees, now often profit-oriented International Development Corporations (IDCs), depend on donors’ priorities to fund their existence, and need to shape their work accordingly, including use of this language and the assumptions behind it, or they fail as businesses.<sup>9</sup> Not-for-profit organizations have to compete as bidders alongside them with polished project proposals for scarce donor funds. The bidding process, combined with the language used, normally removes all concerned even further from opportunities for prior respectful community engagement.<sup>56</sup>

## E2 Some Consequences of the Perfect Storm for Use of CUSP Members’ Programs

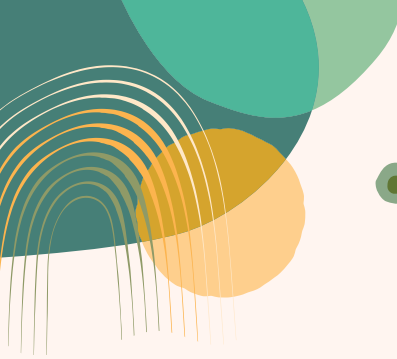
We have seen to our cost how clearly defined quantified goals, often with siloed, single-focus outcomes, limited to short project-cycle time frames, and strict budgets have often resulted in organizations using CUSP programs, which have been recommended by their funders, in inappropriate ways, in order to achieve ‘scale-up’ within the stipulated budget, time frames and required program goals. We have written elsewhere at length<sup>7</sup> about this so will just recap here.

These include: short-term appointments of unqualified trainers; greatly reduced preparation and training times; tokenistic or limited participation of community members, with exclusion of some key groups,<sup>5</sup> reduced numbers of activities; poorly judged resequencing of activities; inappropriate mixing of different activities from different programs; reduced overall program duration; fewer safeguards;

<sup>9</sup> Some donors even require their grant recipients to structure their accounting systems in line with the donor’s own specific requirements – which can create considerable extra work for organizations which have other donors also.

<sup>7</sup> See all CUSP work here <https://salamandertrust.net/project/cusp-community-for-understanding-scale-up-case-studies-stepping-stones/>

<sup>5</sup> Particular sections of a community (such as HIV-negative 10-14 year old girls), are singled out or ‘targeted’ for ‘interventions,’ with no apparent regard or understanding for the wider socio-economic and political context in which they can or cannot flourish in their lives. Grantees have little room to question donors because the business model in which they work makes them wholly dependent on achieving ‘scale-up’ in terms of the ‘target’ numbers, in order to apply for and receive the next grant.

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- We all consider training of community facilitators and participants in their own participatory programming and M&E strategies to be critical for ethical and effective scaling and sustainability.

less meaningful monitoring for unexpected consequences; and prioritization of numbers reached over quality of program delivery. Frequently, all of this is done in the name of 'scale up.'

Lack of adequate training at the outset has an inevitable knock-on effect on the safety and effectiveness of programs, especially as they are taken to scale. We all consider training of community facilitators and participants in their own participatory programming and M&E strategies to be critical for ethical and effective scaling and sustainability. Training, then, becomes essential for social norms programming at all levels, so that authentic community leadership and ownership is possible, and so that supported communities continue to be proactive after a program's end. Yet all this takes time as well as funds, something donors often do not recognize or accept.

The resulting mismatch between top-down, project-driven programming and more relational/contextual approaches also influences conventional methods of evaluation<sup>57</sup> in contrast to a more feminist approach to evaluation.<sup>58</sup> Conventional evaluation guides may frequently emphasize key aspects, such as relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of interventions. However, effective quantification requires simplification. Thus, much measurement focuses on more easily observable aspects of individuals' behavior change at a personal level (such as numbers of people reducing alcohol use, or taking up loans), rather than on a social or relational level (such as improved relationships *between* people), that can sometimes be harder to quantify. So, the challenge for programmers is frequently how to enable some of the key *relationships* between participants – peers or intimate partners, for example – to improve, in the limited project timeframes allowed. It is also challenging to 'measure' such qualitative outcomes, in limited project timeframes – and yet these measurements are what is needed in order to establish the importance of these relationships to the success of the program. By contrast, we observed how feminist evaluation intentionally has a more organic nature, recognizing the reality of slower paces of processual change, allowing time for communities to internalize and reflect on changes, and to observe multiple intersectional shifts, rather than expecting meaningful, sustainable change to happen within limited project-oriented timeframes and measurement scales.

## E3 Which Way for Successful Scale-Up: Through Governments and Market Models...?

Strategic management specialist Larry Cooley, among others, argues that scale requires a delivery 'platform:'

- *"It also has become widely acknowledged that, with few exceptions, the only platforms able to deliver goods, services, and outcomes sustainably at scale are governments and markets, or some combination of the two."*<sup>59</sup>

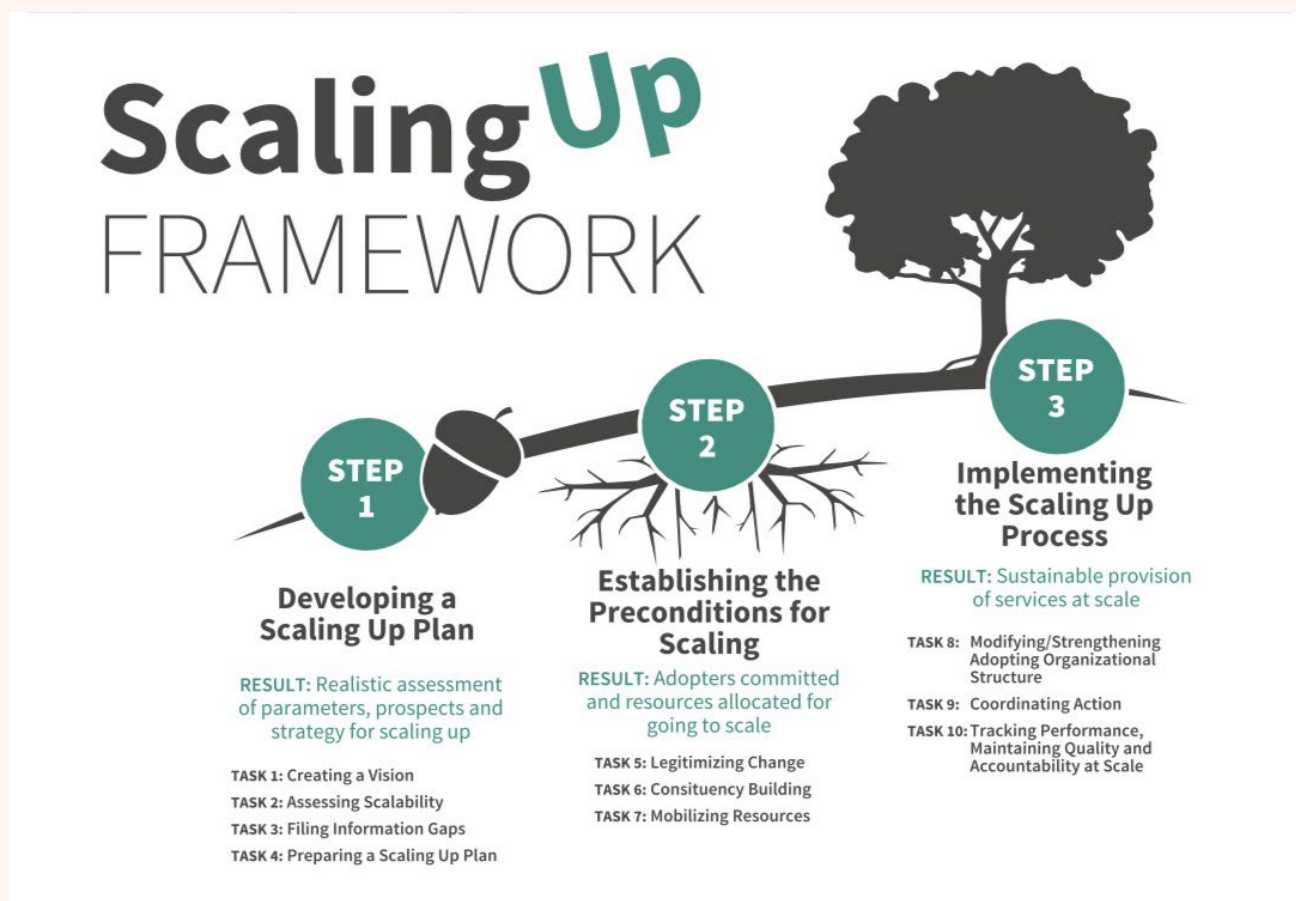


In creating a platform and/or defining goods, services and outcomes for scale up, program managers simplify and disaggregate relationships so that goods can be transferred to new settings.

However, this management viewpoint appears far harder to achieve in practice. For example, a recent toolkit from Spring Impact reflects how very complex this process is: ‘a marathon, not a sprint’<sup>60</sup> and let us recall Kelsey Pipers’ warning that much can get lost in transmission.

Notice also that Cooley’s notion of scale fits our earlier observations about conceptual metaphors: namely that one can take a program (even one built by bringing people together), reduce it to a ‘product’ and export it to new contexts. Cooley uses a diagram (Diagram 4) that looks organic—an oak tree; however, he builds his model on importing a single acorn, which becomes a single tree,<sup>61</sup> with no reference to local context. Furthermore, an oak tree, no matter how mighty it is, takes 40 years to produce its own acorns. Again, therefore, we do not feel that this ‘transplanting’ metaphor is fit for purpose.

**Diagram 4 Cooley’s Image for his Scaling Up Model<sup>61</sup>**







## E4 .... Or Through Acknowledging Organic Complexity in Achieving Equity and Equality?

Indeed, in contrast to Cooley's assertion, Htun and Weldon's 2012 key study of 70 countries over 40 years found that *"feminist mobilization in civil society—not intra-legislative political phenomena such as leftist parties or women in government or economic factors like national wealth—accounts for variation in policy development. In addition, we demonstrate that autonomous movements produce an enduring impact on VAW policy through the institutionalization of feminist ideas in international norms."*<sup>62</sup>

No doubt the most effective, ethical and sustainable social norms change process would see change at *all* levels of a socio-ecological or gender matrix model.<sup>63</sup> Heise (1998), for example, argued that understanding violence against women, at the center of much of our CUSP community work, requires an integrated, ecological framework. That is because violence against women is *"embedded in levels of causality,"*<sup>64</sup> not only at the individual level, but also in the microsystems (e.g. local organizations) and exosystems (e.g. legal system) that structure women's lives. Scaling requires recognition of this complexity. As a result, when scaling through institutional partners, the creators of laws and policies and leaders of institutions certainly need to shift their own social norms, just as we ourselves need to, if we are to seek social norms change amongst the people and communities with whom we partner. We would certainly never see this as an either/or issue. However, given Htun and Weldon's substantial evidence we decided, in our discussions of "feminist scale," to focus on how best to support women in their own communities, as they seek to drive change; and on how best to promote a sustainable effective environment for our work. This includes researching, recognizing at the outset, supporting and not undermining what feminist activists are doing already and being sensitive to language use, and the assumptions behind it. It also includes being explicit about principles of community engagement, to avoid duplicative efforts, and ensure contextualization, so programming can avoid alienation and motivate meaningful community organizing.

Furthermore, as the WIRE report,<sup>65</sup> which has tracked 338 events over 70 years across the world, states:

- *"Campaigns that feature greater women's participation—in terms of both the extent of women's frontline participation and the formal involvement of women's organizations—are more likely to maintain nonviolent discipline (i.e., are less likely to have violent flanks). Importantly, nonviolent campaigns with high degrees of frontline women's participation are also likelier to elicit loyalty shifts from security forces. The same is true for campaigns in which women participants actively call for peaceful mobilization. Ultimately, frontline women's participation is highly correlated with successful resistance campaigns, even when accounting for other factors such as campaign size. A similar effect holds for campaigns*






*that feature gender-inclusive ideologies, which are more likely to succeed than campaigns without such ideologies.”*

Instead, therefore, we decided to explore another metaphor of scale, ‘growth within an ecosystem’ and its entailments. Take the classic scientific definition of ecology given by Haeckel (1866):

● *“By ecology we understand the total science of the relations of the organism to the surrounding outside world, to which we can, in a broad sense, count all ‘conditions of existence.’ These are in part of organic, in part of non-organic nature; both the former and the latter ... are of utmost importance to the form of the organisms, because they force this to adapt itself to them.”<sup>66</sup>*

Although the definition has changed somewhat over time, the essential emphasis on relationships and interrelatedness has remained central to ecology. It is that emphasis that drew us to an ecological perspective for scale, one that honors the material, environmental and relational context that produces a dynamic system out of which people have and do create meaning. We invite you to join us in fleshing out potential entailments of this metaphor.

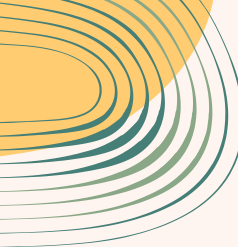
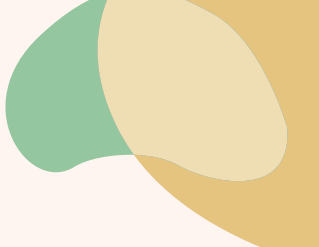
We have discussed, for example, the embeddedness of social norms within an ecological niche, ways in which systems have changed in the past, the affordances or opportunities for different interactions, constraints operating within a system, and so forth. All of these entailments flow from the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor for scale. How can we nurture efforts toward wellbeing and justice within an ecological niche and how can we partner to enact and distribute new behaviors within the system; even further, what patterns in the interaction might be relevant to those in other settings?



**How can we nurture efforts toward wellbeing and justice within an ecological niche** and how can we partner to enact and distribute new behaviors within the system; even further, what patterns in the interaction might be relevant to those in other settings?

With this metaphor for scale, one is not importing the seed from outside but rather observing, as a participant, where the ‘local’ seeds are, which will be best suited to the local habitat and cause least disruption to other flora and fauna, already existing (even in the imaginations of people). The outsider does not provide a product or expert knowledge like an engineer, but rather finds the conditions that already exist and, through dialogue, strengthens or awakens them.<sup>†</sup> The limits of the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor might be how far out movement can extend (without leaving the system), but within it one might think, like Andrea Cornwall does, about taking a journey with those in the community.

<sup>†</sup> Whereas unchecked, unlimited, linear growth in a business model is considered to be good at all costs, the perception of growth in an ecological model recognizes that the world follows natural cycles of birth, growth, decay, death and decomposition, creating the compost which nurtures new life; and that unchecked unlimited growth in the natural world, such as cancer cells multiplying or a child growing too tall too fast, are in fact worrying and need attention. So, the business model has taken growth out of context, detached from quality, whereas the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ model is embracing both quantity and quality.

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- *“The process of empowerment can usefully be captured in the metaphor of a journey travelled along pathways, one on which women can travel alone or in the company of others, through terrain that may be pitted with thorny thickets, fast-flowing rivers, mud and marshes, and along paths that can double-back on themselves, meander on winding side-routes and lead to dead-ends, as well as opening up new vistas, expanding horizons and extending possibilities. With this conception of empowerment comes a perspective on the contribution that external actors can make: clearing obstacles from commonly travelled paths; supporting stopping places for women to gather to reflect on their journeys and gain tips, route-maps, courage and the company of others; and providing sign-posts, stiles, bridges and sustenance for those making these journeys. This encourages an approach that looks at different dimensions and sites of empowerment in a more holistic way, one that aims to understand the relational dynamics of power and positive change at a variety of levels, in different spaces and over time.”<sup>67</sup>*

The ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor invites us to explore the very complexity of relationships within communities in a way that explicitly focuses on this complexity (as opposed to a siloed focus on a single problematic issue within communities). We, as practitioners, are located in, or are closely connected with, communities in the same way that ecologist Merlin Sheldrake describes:

- *“Lab biologists spend most of the time in charge of the pieces of life they study. Their own human lives are lived outside the flasks that contain their subject matter. Field biologists rarely have so much control. The world is the flask and they’re inside it. Storms...Trees fall... Bullet ants sting....The forest and its inhabitants dispel any illusions that scientists are in charge. Humility quickly sets in.”<sup>68</sup>*

Sheldrake further discusses how the fundamental conventions of scientific research are shifting, given the ecological models emerging in the sciences: *“To talk about individuals [living entities] made no sense any more. Biology – the study of living organisms – had transformed into ecology – the study of the relationships between living organisms.”<sup>69</sup>* His example is but one recognition that conventional top-down approaches to science are no longer working. One has to be *of and in* the system to study it meaningfully.

An exploration of complex adaptive systems theory that arises in ecological studies as a more effective paradigm is starting to influence other branches of science, including health service delivery. As Paul Plsek states,




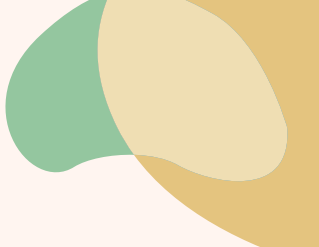
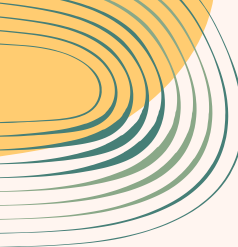
- *“The distinction between mechanical and naturally adaptive systems is obvious when given some thought. However, many system designers do not seem to take this distinction into account. Rather, they design complex human systems as if the parts and interconnections were predictable in their behavior, although fundamentally, they are not. When the human parts do not act as expected or hoped for, we say that people are being “unreasonable” or “resistant to change,” their behavior is “wrong” or “inappropriate.” The system designer’s reaction typically is to specify behavior in even more detail via laws, regulations, structures, rules, guidelines, and so on. The unstated goal seems to be to make the human parts act more mechanical[ly].”<sup>69</sup>*

We have found in our own practice that, when others take our programs and, from them, “design” a system (e.g., a part of a program, a training manual) to export into new communities, they have more often than not failed. This is partly because they are predicting based on a model of mechanistic homogeneity, rather than on the real and varied lived experiences of diverse community members themselves. They then conclude, on the basis of their “adaptation,” that the original methodology is ineffective. However, we feel that use of this model to adapt our work encourages reification of our programs, of their processes and materials: and indeed a ‘thingification’ of the community members and program trainers alike, as Hickel<sup>70</sup> describes it, quoting Aimé Césaire.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, we have seen how decontextualized models of social norms change and scale, which do not acknowledge the interconnections between different geo-political forces, can create more inequality and violence for women. All these issues, discussed in Section D, are deeply entrenched in the world we all inhabit. It can be very hard for women to imagine alternative pathways to their lives if ever-increasing market pressures mean that they have to find (more) paid work to pay for basic essentials, and that they may otherwise experience more violence. Women’s rights to informed choice in all areas of their lives are critical for their health, wellbeing and safety. Yet most issues that affect

“ We have seen how decontextualized models of social norms change and scale, which do not acknowledge the interconnections between different geo-political forces, can create more inequality and violence for women.






**Thus in the end, if we do not openly discuss this background context,** it becomes all too easy for women to feel – and be told – that they are just not working hard enough and that it is their own fault that they are finding life increasingly difficult. If this is the case, then, ultimately, we are all letting women down and just doing them more harm.

women's lives, such as this background geopolitical context, are so hidden that communities are socialized instead into assuming that this is the norm. Thus in the end, if we do not openly discuss this background context, it becomes all too easy for women to feel – and be told – that they are just not working hard enough and that it is their own fault that they are finding life increasingly difficult. If this is the case, then, ultimately, we are all letting women down and just doing them more harm.

We therefore explored next what it would mean to drop the business metaphor of 'scaling up,' as an externally determined model which expects to expand by reducing unit costs of production.

By contrast, we found that organizations that focus on developing rich and varied relationships within communities and that provide a context from which community members themselves can take up activities and activism, have been more successful. While we recognize that there are certain features and patterns at play across the environments in which we have worked, we have resisted formalizing those features in a manner that strips them from context.<sup>u</sup>



We found that organizations that focus on developing rich and varied relationships within communities and that provide a context from which community members themselves can take up activities and activism, have been more successful.

<sup>u</sup> We were heartened by Srilatha Batliwala, author of CREA's 2020 publication "All about **Movements**," as we see our ideas align around the aptness of the conceptual metaphor of scale as growth in an ecosystem. [https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements\\_Web.pdf](https://creaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/All-About-Movements_Web.pdf)

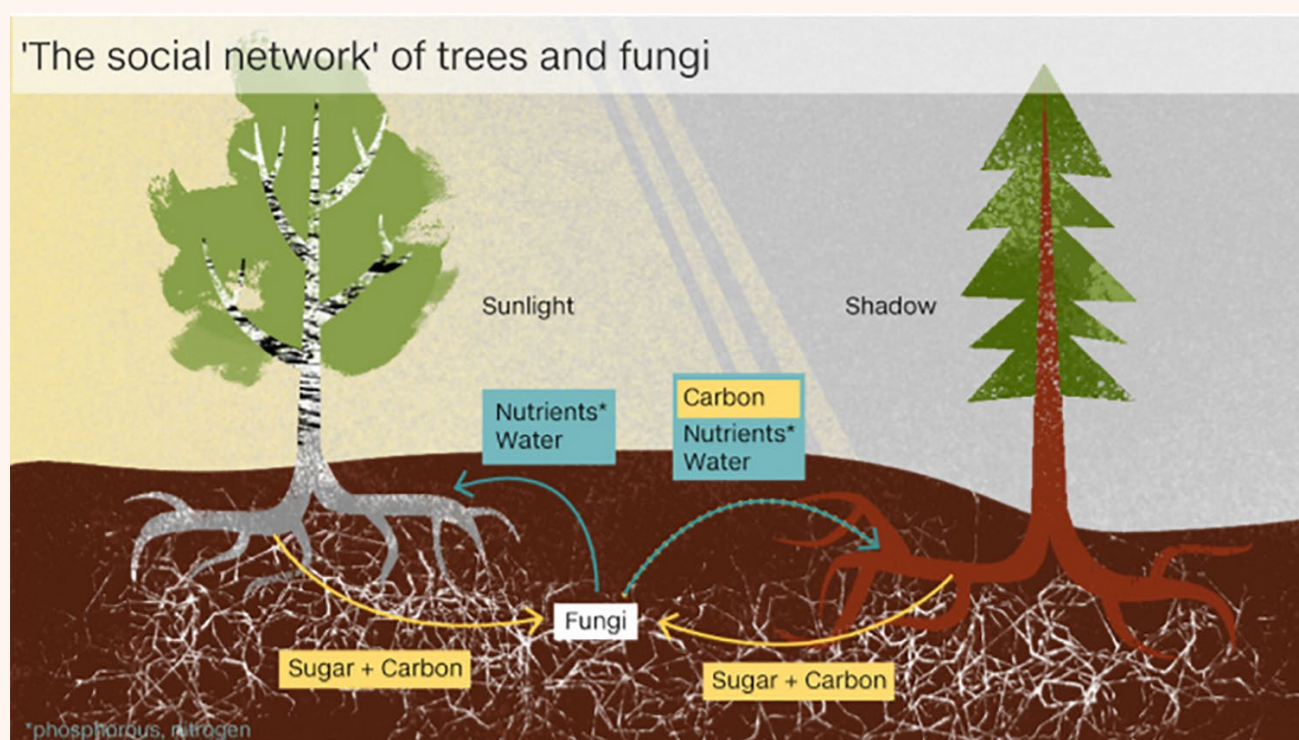


## F Delving Deeper to Sustain Stronger Roots

Therefore, we propose a model of ‘feminist scale,’ which explicitly considers the structural changes in societies that are happening under the patriarchal umbrella. The geo-political analysis that feminism recognizes, but which is often unrecognized, overlooked or ignored by others, provides us with a means to understand the way in which inequalities keep reinventing themselves. Without this feminist analysis, adaptation/expansion of our programs can inadvertently just reinforce the status quo.

Since current top-down siloed approaches are not addressing these complex historical forces and do not include community members’ own perspectives or experiences of them, we turned again to Htun and Weldon’s findings<sup>82</sup> to explore what successful scaling of social norms change *does* look like in communities, through studying some social movements that have respected ecological constraints and yet harnessed dynamic energy from within to create change. In this section we examine the deep roots and diverse activities of existing movements, and what we can learn from them.

**Diagram 5 – Using a Model from Nature to Describe Movement Building<sup>72</sup>**





We studied a number of effective social movements, many of them feminist,<sup>92</sup> that align with the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor for scale.’ We discussed how ‘movements’ have informal ‘invisible’ structures, often scaling up by word of mouth, through relationships, not involving governments or markets or established buildings and sometimes not even registered entities. We compared these to the model of the ‘wood wide web’<sup>73</sup> (see also Diagram 5), where social networks of trees, fungi and other living entities connect with and support each other for everyone’s mutual well-being. The natural world around us follows a cyclical progression of growth, production and fall back, with much activity happening out of view of the surface. If a tree falls down or a mushroom is picked to be eaten, other growth soon emerges to replace them, shooting from roots deep underground, linked to networks of interdependence which offer advance warning, protecting them from drought, floods and pests.



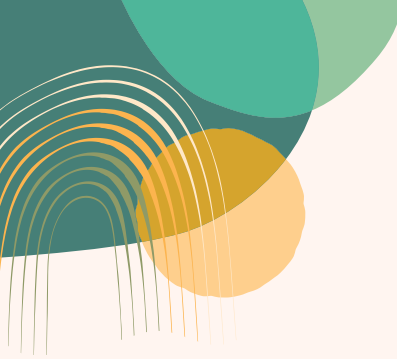
An organic, ecological approach requires the deep knowledge of surrounding contexts that is critical for promoting gender equity, including who holds traditional power, how power flows, the strength of connection and relationships, and who is open to new information and practices.

We next identified a diverse array of key activities employed by these social movements and observed how many of these actions are rarely identified by donors for funding social norms change (see Diagram 6). Ecological models of community development recognize the dynamic interplay among individuals, their families and neighborhoods, their material resources, their local organizations and governing bodies, and the larger structural determinants (institutions) of their society. An organic, ecological approach requires the deep knowledge of surrounding contexts that is critical for promoting gender equity, including who holds traditional power, how power flows, the strength of connection and relationships, and who is open to new information and practices. What actions have they tried and to what effect? Moving directly toward action, communities can focus on local social norms within their neighborhoods, through engaging significant others, or can take action to try and change the ways in which their institutions are structured (e.g., changing laws, changing policies). Once again, understanding the complexity of community context shows how change is not the result of outsiders coming in serving as experts, but rather how change agents (or allies) can create and activate the linkages between the systems, interacting around issues that the community cares about, such as safety, education or health. The metaphor of ‘scaling up’ does not capture this critical complexity. By contrast, the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor warns against seeing individuals without their social-cultural-economic-political contexts (say as heroic agents); and against seeing institutions as operating independently from communities (say, as dictating law from above).


As we noted above, conceptual metaphors are powerful in their ability to define what can be counted as reality. With ‘scaling up,’ one tends to think of what can be transported and transplanted, with little effort from one source to another: a set of exercises, or brochures, communication materials, a training







workshop. We have many stories of how organizations have used our programs, for example, to raise awareness amongst adolescent girls and young women in communities about the challenges they face, without providing follow-up support to enable them to develop their newly germinated ideas to grow into actions. By contrast, with ecosystem thinking, one considers instead how to grow one's work from *within*, in partnership, noting and bringing to awareness the links between the individual activist, her relationships with others around her, the organizations within the community, the legal, religious, health, business and educational systems, her material resources, and government. Ideally one then provides support (including funding) to enable those linkages to develop and strengthen, while also learning from the process.



**With ecosystem thinking, one considers instead how to grow one's work from within, in partnership, noting and bringing to awareness the links between the individual activist, her relationships with others around her, the organizations within the community, the legal, religious, health, business and educational systems, her material resources, and government.**

So if we judge 'scaling up' to be less fruitful in thinking about how to best support social change, and we embrace 'growth in an ecosystem' and its entailments, the following activities within a given community come to the fore as places of participation and activism—places for partnership, dialogue, deliberation and learning. Note that when and where to enter a community (an activity itself) takes emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, empathy, commitment to meaningful solidarity and humility. Interestingly, although some funders are hesitant to fund some of the activities, such as strikes, sit-ins or marches, in fact we also observed how the activities themselves are not radical, progressive, or conformist and they do not necessarily result in norms change and gender equity. These same activities can be used by those seeking repression or regression of **rights**.<sup>v</sup> Therefore, the activities become meaningful levers of social norms change and gender equity when they are grounded in deep organizing that emphasizes mutual respect, human rights, relationships, solidarity, shared analysis and vision, deliberation and debate, and lead by those most affected. Further, working within and across power and place in social relationships, movements engage in transformative action when they are grounded in the voices, aspirations and experiences of communities most affected with a shared vision of gender equity. Often their demands of power holders and society as a whole seek structural and social change, using the activities in Diagram 6 (among others) as levers of change, visible forms of activism and action, rooted in deep organizing.<sup>w</sup>



The activities become meaningful levers of social norms change and gender equity when they are grounded in deep organizing that emphasizes mutual respect, human rights, relationships, solidarity, shared analysis and vision, deliberation and debate, and lead by those most affected.

<sup>v</sup> Shameem, N. (2021). Rights at Risk: Time for Action. In *AWID*. Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). [https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/rightsatrisk\\_timeforaction\\_ourstrendsreport2021.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/rightsatrisk_timeforaction_ourstrendsreport2021.pdf)

<sup>w</sup> Some apparently 'harmless' activities can also provoke strong negative reactions from governments. See eg <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-56060232>

**Diagram 6 – Some of the Range of Actions Employed by Social Norms Change Movements to Effect Change**



Unsurprisingly, the development of community organizing, or ‘organizing relationships to build community’ has a gendered history. Women’s relegation to private spaces limited their ability to organize in public spaces – and yet it also opened up the opportunity for alternative forms of activism. Compared to the traditional “Alinsky model,” which was built upon a clear distinction between public and private spheres and more masculine attributes (e.g. focused on individual accomplishments and zero-sum approaches), the ‘women-centered organizing model’ blurred the lines between public and private, including activities that do not fall clearly into either category, such as providing food and childcare for organizers. The model viewed the neighborhood as an extension of the household, focusing more on a relational approach than an individualized one.



- *“In women-centered organizing, power begins in the private sphere of relationships and thus is not conceptualized as zero-sum but as limitless and collective.”<sup>74</sup>*

While history has largely excluded and/or invisibilized the behind-the-scenes organizing done by women, and particularly women of color, it is clear that *“behind every successful social movement is a community or a network of communities.”*<sup>75</sup> Through this historical analysis, it is evident that patriarchal forces have misrepresented the accomplishments of women as community organizers. This context provides an additional layer of significance in understanding why it is critical to center feminist organizing at the heart of social change efforts.

Another strategy gaining interest is the development of citizens’ assemblies.<sup>76</sup> One such assembly in Ireland, led to national reform of its abortion law,<sup>77</sup> a fine example of women’s rights’ advancement at scale.<sup>x</sup> The Financial Times stated: *“David Farrell, a professor of politics at University College Dublin, who was the “research leader” for the Irish citizens’ assembly, said public anger after the 2008 financial crisis had shown that representative democracies needed to innovate.”*<sup>78</sup>

In sum, we recognized how a varied range of movement building activities is needed to effect lasting social norms change. We also reflected on how the word ‘radical’ means ‘coming from the roots.’ From gaining the right to vote, to calling out abuse, to running for and getting elected to political offices, to striking, feminists have used a range of strategies.

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<sup>x</sup> This was in the context of Ireland having been a profoundly catholic country, where for decades, girls who became pregnant outside marriage (including through rape) had been forced to live in ‘Magdalena’ convents where they were put to strenuous work as laundry women until the baby was born. The baby would then be sent away for adoption, often abroad. This system was portrayed in the film ‘Philomena’ (2013). Magdalena convents were only closed in 1996. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdalene\\_Laundries\\_in\\_Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magdalene_Laundries_in_Ireland)






## G Qualities of Effective Movements

We next explored what we considered to be key common *qualities* of the movements we had studied, in order to see what we could learn from these.

We observed that women have been organizing for far longer than is conventionally acknowledged<sup>y</sup>; and movements share the following common qualities as a minimum.

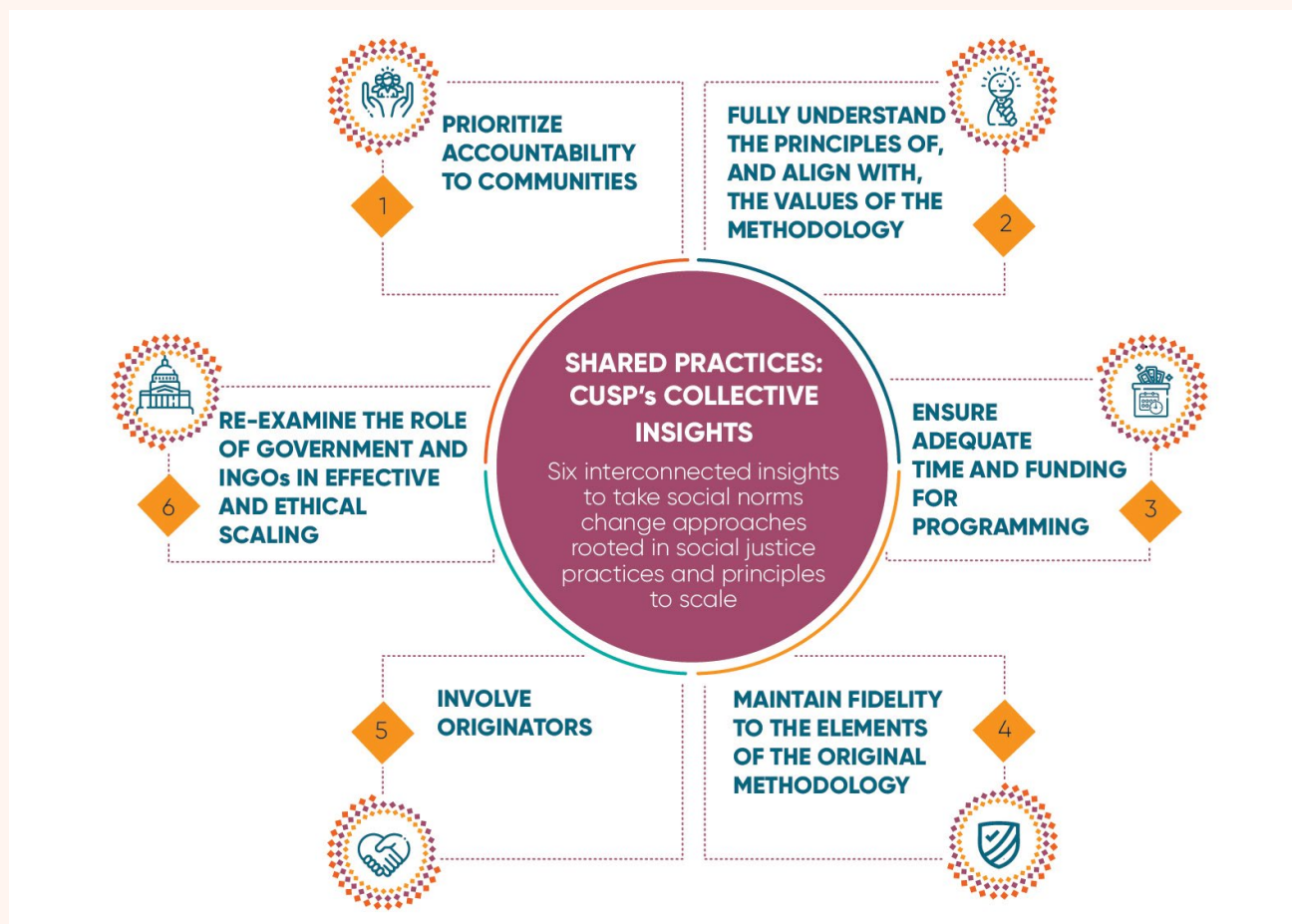
Effective Movements:

- 
- are nimble and constantly evolving in process and strategy as they work towards a vision.
  - progress and learn from their achievements and failures, revisiting and reformulating their goals when needed, to meet the priorities of the collective while maintaining shared principles and vision. Significant achievements in one area become points of celebration and motivation for revised goals, when needed, and collective action. In other words, they do not necessarily have a single focus on an endpoint – rather, they can be constantly evolving (such as getting the vote for women, then getting a representative number of women in parliament, getting women’s rights on the agenda, etc.).
  - are led by people most affected by the issues.
  - are about disrupting and redistributing power.
  - are more effective and inclusive when their organization is decentralized, participatory, grounded in community, often unregistered and without offices.
  - are built on networks of personal, trusting relationships between individuals, households, and communities.
  - do not fit into project-based activities from an organization.
  - are designed to achieve social justice for the ultimate benefit of all.
  - are self-reflexive in nature, seeking to understand if and how oppressive power dynamics are at risk of being reproduced.

We then returned to consider our own original CUSP insights into our principles of scale, to review whether our own principles align with movements’ activities and qualities (see Diagram 7).

<sup>y</sup> Rafia Zakaria, author of *Against White Feminism* has pointed out the importance of recognising that women have been organising for centuries, not just since (white) suffragettes started calling for the vote. She described how 200 years ago women in India organized to protest against colonialization. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/317/317241/against-white-feminism/9780241446096.html>

**Diagram 7 – CUSP Collective Insights – Revisited**



Throughout this year of discussion of our collective experiences scaling our approaches, we confirmed that our insights are indeed more aligned with feminist movement building: rooted in communities, and working with and alongside those most affected by issues, across a complex range of issues, identified, led and guided by them. This reflection confirmed to us also that efforts to scale up evidence-based social change approaches to achieve transformative change for women and girls often apply a donor-driven, top-down, short-term, narrowly designed project-focused and results-based framework to social change. Yet, despite good intentions, these efforts ignore what has become evident to us: the importance of feminist principles to the design and implementation of CUSP programs and to our values around partnership, participation, design and implementation. Our approaches themselves, like the activities of movement building, are effective when rooted in feminist movement building.

**Efforts to scale up evidence-based social change approaches** to achieve transformative change for women and girls often apply a donor-driven, top-down, short-term, narrowly designed project-focused and results-based framework to social change.




# H A feminist Approach to Ethical, Effective and Sustainable Gendered Social Norms Change

With this section we move into our conclusions from our year of discussion. We outline here first our conclusions for our own work. In Section I, we look at wider policy implications and conclude with some final words in Section J.

## H1 Ensuring Our Own Programs are Better Adapted – With Feminist Scale

So what could implementation of feminist values at scale look like? We consider that our respective programs can contribute to movements, and indeed are part of larger movements for social norms change. We consider that social norms change can be better achieved by feminist scaling, rather than through the ‘unlimited growth=good’ blanket metaphor, because we have seen how CUSP’s principles align with key feminist values. We therefore see our programs fitting best as part of larger, locally driven efforts for social change. In our view, our respective programs are optimally used through *adding* to existing activism rather than in siloed ways or separately from that work.

On the basis of all we have discussed, we recommend that a feminist approach to scale includes at least seven key elements:

- 
- Effective, in-depth pre-program consultation with all those who will be affected (feminist activists, donors, community and religious leaders, community members, service providers, community organizations, and government officials),
  - Commitment to a sustained, safe process defined by collaboration, mutual respect and balanced power—with adequate budget to support such processes,
  - Culturally sensitive approaches to adaptation, with emphasis on learning and responsiveness,
  - High-quality, in-depth, on-going training and mentoring,
  - Accountability to communities, with an emphasis on those most affected,
  - Facilitation of connections with local governing bodies,
  - Political in nature.



These elements appear at the center of the infographic that we have created below (Diagram 8). It depicts an alternative model of effective feminist scaling processes, rooted in feminist values and nurturing and building movements.

**Diagram 8 – CUSP 2021 Image to Show how Feminist Scale Builds Movements**



The last element, sometimes even overlooked by those with a community-focus, is that this work is fundamentally political in nature, as it seeks to challenge disparities and equitably share power, despite all assumptions that it is somehow *apolitical*. Further, partnerships with local governing bodies ideally need to align with community organizers' own values. Wherever possible, it is highly valuable to work together with and negotiate with local leadership, though when and how this happens may be dependent on the receptiveness of local leadership. In successful cases, the leaders may have themselves taken part in programs as participants, understand and appreciate the need to listen to the community and support their proposals, agree to making changes to projects,

“ This work is fundamentally political in nature, as it seeks to challenge disparities and equitably share power, despite all assumptions that it is somehow *apolitical*.



and even take on the role of engaging directly with donors when programs do not meet local requirements. Community leaders inevitably have a stronger mandate to speak on what affects their community than do INGOs. Of course, there are also many examples of where local or national leadership is invested in the status quo – which is where the role of movements to galvanize change is so key and can never be replaced by outside ‘interventions.’

## H2 Ensuring We Support Movements Effectively

Leading on from this, we also clarified ways in which we could, in our work, better connect with and support women’s rights activists in existing or emerging movements. This is, once more, in reflection of Htun and Weldon’s evidence that shows that the *only* effective way to reduce violence against women is through independent women’s rights movements. Indeed, as we worked on this think piece, the call to support feminist movements only grew stronger. We add our voices to this call.<sup>z</sup>

We especially encourage investment and strengthening of *local* ownership and leadership, to ensure that what is already happening is nurtured and flourishes. This involves learning from and contributing to existing work on gender equality, avoiding duplication or competing programming, commitment to operationalize feminist principles, financial support for, working with and being accountable to local, provincial and national feminist networks, and honoring the efforts and activism that already exist.

For example, “proximate leadership” is a name used by some to describe successful social movements where leaders come from within the community and *“have the experience, relationships, data, and knowledge that are essential for developing solutions with measurable and sustainable impact.”*<sup>79</sup> Their very embeddedness in the community and in the situation allows them to find strengths and enhance capacities of others in community-driven projects. Closely aligned is the “locally driven, network supported” model, which several successful organizations already use. This model *“marries the best elements of the top-down and bottom-up models, and encourages an ego-less, fluid, intentional approach to systems-level social change.”*<sup>80</sup>

In any context, these included, it is essential—yet rarely done—to ask networks to identify *their own* priority visions and challenges, as they see them, rather than assuming their ‘needs’ from outside. For example, we could offer network members places as participants in our training programs, if they felt they would be helpful to them in their work. Some could subsequently be offered transferable skills training as facilitators and trainers, which could also be a future source of income. We could include diversity/rights awareness training in our programs, to build and ensure care, respect and support for community members who are often the most politically and materially excluded. We could benefit significantly from network members’ insights into making adaptations as relevant and context-specific as possible. We could seek to secure funding to enable scale-up of our programs across, and driven by their own *existing* networks. We could share our technical skills and learn from the skills and knowledge of *others* through partnerships and collaborations. We could also offer links to like-minded organizations that could provide training in organizational capacity-strengthening (such as financial management, human resources skills etc.), but only if networks themselves would choose this. Such training should never be a condition of partnership or funding.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>z</sup> See <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/06/28/feminist-movements-are-key-to-public-health-equity/>





# I Transforming Wider Policies that Might Better Align with the ‘Growth in an Ecosystem’ Metaphor for Scale



**If we are going to rethink** how to expand our programs in line with the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor, we need to harvest research from science and economics that supports such a re-orientation.

Once again, we reminded ourselves that our programs form a very small part of effective and ethical gendered social norms change. In this section, we look again at the upstream, wider global picture which has created the current financially driven framework for top-down development, governed by the domination of the GDP model and chronically hampered by global debt repayments. If we are going to rethink how to expand our programs in line with the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor, we need to harvest research from science and economics that supports such a re-orientation. We now turn to promising lines of such research, as examples.

*“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”*

Albert Einstein

## II Western Science Catching up with Ancient Wisdoms

In our reading, we repeatedly saw authors describing how western science is often catching up with ancient wisdoms. For people in many communities, especially those more closely engaged with the environment, supporting themselves by producing and owning their own seeds, food,<sup>82</sup> water, and fuel supplies, building their own homes and so on, all these issues are deeply and inextricably interconnected. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, a strong sense of interconnectedness between people and issues and the world around them has survived from pre-colonial times. The word “Ubuntu”





reflects this.<sup>aa</sup> In Latin America the Indigenous Quechan phrase “sumak kawsay”<sup>ab</sup> enshrines the inalienable right of the environment and respect for its protection, recognizing our deep interconnectedness with and dependence upon the health of the world around us. In several South and SouthEast Asian philosophies, this interconnectedness of humans as a *part* of, rather than somehow separate from, above and ‘owning’ the natural world, is also a given.<sup>ac</sup> Entities such as the Costa Rican<sup>ab</sup> government and the Kurdish women’s movement<sup>ab</sup> are strategically building on these linkages.<sup>ab</sup> These ecological-based approaches all stand in sharp contrast to the linear growth model, which sees humans as separated from and ‘superior’ to the world around us, literally fueled by extraction and depletion of ‘our’ natural ‘resources,’ that has driven Western development for centuries.<sup>ac</sup>



These ecological-based approaches all stand in sharp contrast to the linear growth model, which sees humans as separated from and ‘superior’ to the world around us, literally fueled by extraction and depletion of ‘our’ natural ‘resources,’ that has driven Western development for centuries.

To try to isolate and focus on one issue at a time, without recognizing its relationship to all the others, as funders and their implementers would have them do, is deeply exhausting and undermining for community members and activists and, all too often, far removed from their own lived realities and perceptions of the world around them: it is essentially a clash of world views. Policies that would derive from this new science could include: more resources channeled into strengthening a community’s ability to monitor, evaluate and strengthen its own health and well-being, to set its own goals for change, and to hold duty bearers to account; appreciation for both quantitative and qualitative, formal and participatory approaches to learning and evaluation; investment in capacity exchanges; respect for and recognition of practice-based learning; and more.

## 12 Alternative Concepts for Sustainable Economic Growth

There is much afoot to hearten us, which seeks to redress the imbalances described here. We felt especially impressed, for example, by the ‘doughnut economics’<sup>87</sup> model created by Kate Raworth and partners. This model rejects the GDP model, replacing it instead with a model which recognizes the critical need for growth to remain with limits. The resulting ‘doughnut’ (the green band of circle in Diagram 9) needs to ensure that there is no shortfall of critical basic needs, which build and ensure the social foundation of all our lives. If these fall into red danger zones, then the fabric of stable society is at stake. Similarly, the outside of the doughnut indicates the dangers of the planet over-reaching our ecological ceiling, placing extreme pressure on our so-called natural ‘resources.’ The doughnut

<sup>aa</sup> South African psychologist, Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela states: “A person becomes a person through other people...the notion of a unitary individual is based on a false premise...the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was guided by a principle of connectedness.”

<sup>ab</sup> See also the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer. <https://www.robinwallkimmerer.com/>

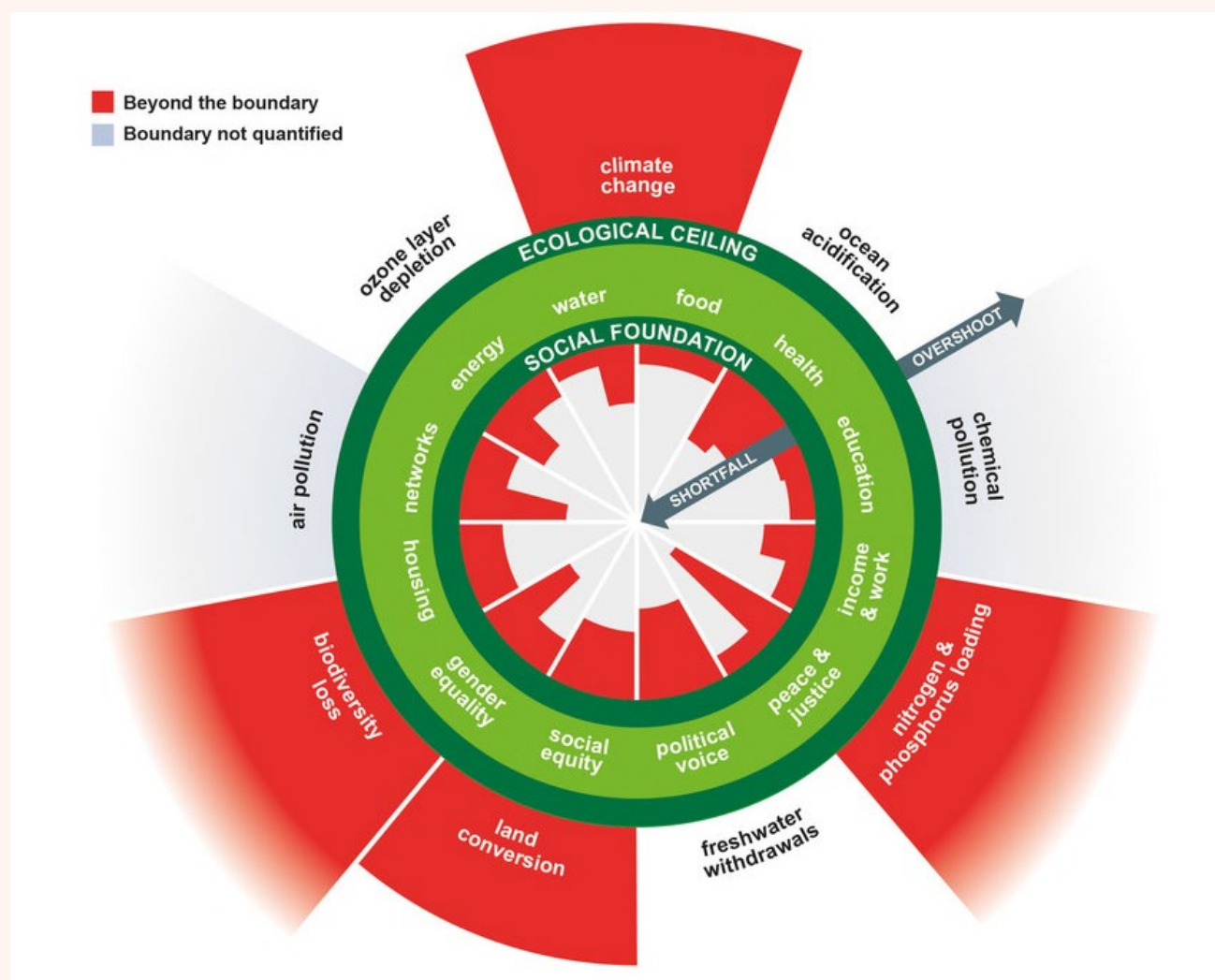
<sup>ac</sup> In August 2021 at the inaugural meeting of WHO’s Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence, doctor and epidemiologist Sabine Gabrysch stated “I think it’s important in science that we dig deep in some specialised areas, but it’s also important that we then connect the pieces and integrate them again for the bigger picture...” [https://twitter.com/sabine\\_gabrysch/status/1435835335947210752?s=21](https://twitter.com/sabine_gabrysch/status/1435835335947210752?s=21)





model proposes instead that all planetary development should lie within the boundaries of the green area, ensuring social justice for all. This model rejects the concept of GDP as a model of an unceasing linear growth trajectory, as outdated, profit-driven, dangerous to the future existence of the planet and exceedingly unjust. Whilst there is much to learn still about how this doughnut model could work in practice,<sup>88</sup> given the centuries of neoliberal policies and practices which will need dismantling, COVID-19, if nothing else, has taught us that rapid and radical global change is indeed possible.


**Diagram 9 – The Doughnut Economics Model<sup>89</sup>**



We also know that there are many other different measures which can evaluate a country's health and well-being, instead of solely tracking linear economic growth. These include, for example, measures of well-being,<sup>90</sup> health, life expectancy, attainment of meaningful education and employment, decent wages,<sup>91</sup> safe, violence-free societies and families, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI),<sup>91</sup> happiness measures,<sup>92</sup> Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs),<sup>93</sup> people-centered measures of contraceptive use,<sup>94</sup> as well as measures of quality of life,<sup>95</sup> social cohesion and general state of contentment. The recently **launched** Universal Vulnerability Index<sup>96</sup> is also attracting increasing global interest.



In sum, we have seen how the neoliberal economics model aligns with ‘scaling up’ as a metaphor for the expansion of programs such as ours. By contrast, we ascertain that the doughnut economics model and the health and well-being models are alternative ones that better align with the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor of progress at scale. There is a critical and urgent need for global public investment<sup>97</sup> in these alternate models (such as the doughnut economics model).<sup>116</sup> These alternate models value what was in place before the spread of neoliberal policies and practices: indigenous knowledge about the importance of connection and holistic well-being, recognizing and embracing complex intersectionalities.



**The doughnut economics model and the health and well-being models** are alternative ones that better align with the ‘growth in an ecosystem’ metaphor of progress at scale.

Donor, government and organizational policies that flow from a focus on global public investment in movements could include: embracing a recognition of complex adaptive systems theory and the value of complexity theory in tracking effective social norms change (see Plsek,<sup>90</sup> cited in Section E4); related systems-level work that can create a more supportive environment for social norms change; funding of feminist movements;<sup>77</sup> investment in core funding for longer term social norms change programming; and deeper partnerships with communities at the onset of programs, aligned with their visions, aspirations and abilities. These investments, centered on feminist scale and alternate models of health and well-being, would encourage collaboration, evolution, process and center communities most affected, rather than organizations most funded.

A concomitant overhaul of global progress measures would include, once again, an investment in community M&E systems that enable communities to track their own progress, as well to enable them to hold service providers, program implementers and their donors to account; and that track unintended consequences and backlash related to programs. We also need policies which invest in, recognize and celebrate the lasting importance of mutual appreciation and shared learning across the continents, so that communities in the Global North can also learn from those in the Global South,<sup>ad</sup> to confound deeply entrenched assumptions that knowledge flow is only a one-way street.

<sup>ad</sup> One long-term model has been the reciprocal link between Gunjur in the Gambia and Marlborough in the UK. <http://www.oneworld365.org/company/marlborough-brandt-group>







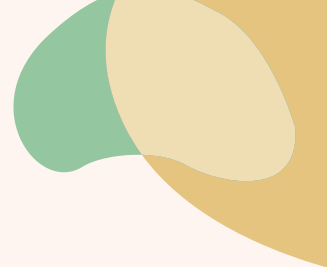
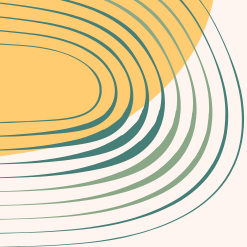
# J Weaving the Roots and Shoots Together

In conclusion, we share this summary of our year-long 2020 discussions, to promote broader discourse in circles seeking to scale gendered social norms change. We have learnt much together on this journey and hope that this summary paper will promote further reflection and discussion amongst readers.

Our key learnings are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Key Learnings from Our CUSP 2020 Discussions**

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ‘Scaling up’ as a metaphor for growth and expansion emphasizes hierarchal organizational structures, quantification, reducing programs to packaged components, objectification through language, business models of success, values the apolitical. This metaphor directly impacts how norms change programs are designed, adapted and implemented, and misses the principles and processes that are fundamental to the transformation of gender based social norms. Without a feminist analysis, the adaptation and expansion of programming can inadvertently reinforce the status quo, despite good intentions.</li><li>• Ecological models emphasize relationship and interrelatedness, recognize and work with dynamic material, environmental, and relationship contexts and honor history. The ‘growth in an ecosystem’ model is about finding the conditions that exist and, through dialogue, strengthening or awakening them.</li><li>• The transformation of inequitable gender-based social norms grounded in movements that are guided by ecological models are grounded in deep organizing that emphasizes relationships, solidarity, shared analysis and vision, deliberation and debate. They work within and across power and place in social relationships, centering the voices, needs, priorities and actions of marginalized communities with a shared vision of gender equity.</li><li>• These movements are nimble and evolving, emphasize learning, are led by those most affected by issues, disrupt and redistribute power, led by organizations that are decentralized, participatory and rooted in local community, are designed to achieve social justice and look beyond project-oriented timelines and activities.</li><li>• Our programs fit as part of larger, locally driven efforts for social change. They add to existing activism rather than functioning in siloed ways.</li><li>• Our call for feminist scale aligns with – and is dependent upon – a wider global call for equitable transformation of existing economic and political systems to ensure women’s health, safety, well-being, prosperity and rights.</li></ul>
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We are mindful that these deliberations are only the beginning and that many others are trying to re-vision and reimagine how ‘development’ can most empower more people and more communities. For example, we have worked with colleagues from around the world who have, for decades, promoted participatory ways of learning from and sharing with communities and one another, in deeply principled ways.<sup>98</sup>

We are also inspired by more recent global shifts in thinking and action, shaped by the #metoo and #aidtoo movements, the #blacklivesmatter movement, #decolonizeaid<sup>99</sup> and the courageous activists who lead these. We are inspired by the knowledge that non-violent movement building and indeed democracy, whilst undoubtedly fragile, can indeed effect meaningful social norms change; and that it takes just 3.5% of a population to support a social movement for that change to start to happen.<sup>100</sup>

Moving forward, there are many examples where gendered social norms change has happened from within empowered communities and moved to legal, policy, institutional and societal levels.<sup>101</sup>,<sup>ae</sup> We need to document these and learn from them much more rigorously than we have to date.

For example, successful movements have been initiated to ensure women’s rights to vote in almost all countries which hold elections;<sup>102</sup> to increase proportions of seats held by women in parliaments around the world;<sup>103</sup> to increase proportions of women in senior management roles globally,<sup>104</sup> and indeed, growing global recognition that violence against women is wrong and must be outlawed.<sup>105</sup> We also have evidence of this from our own experiences with our own programs. We are learning how best to make movements toward gender equity and equality happen more, to make them happen better and to support more of them to happen. Part of that, we now think, involves engaging others in the meaning of ‘scaling up.’

Lastly, we hope we have made it clear why we do not consider the business scaleup metaphor fit for purpose, and that another metaphor, that of ‘growth in an ecosystem,’ could be much more helpful in bringing about social norms changes that will offer huge benefits to us all. We look forward to engaging in this conversation further.

*“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”*

Audre Lorde

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<sup>ae</sup> Indeed Jessica Horn argues that we would not have achieved what we have in relation to violence against women as a public health concern globally without feminist movements. See Endnote 11.



## Acknowledgements

CUSP members Ellen Bajenja, Lufuno Barro, Diane Gillespie, Hawa Kagoya, Anjalee Kohli, Rebecka Lundgren, Lori Michau, Tina Musuya, Tvisha Nevatia and Alice Welbourn all contributed to the multiple discussions which shaped and informed this article. Special thanks also to Leah Goldmann who also contributed to these discussions, as well as an early draft of the article, and who supported final production processes. Sub-committee members EB, DG, AW and, initially, LG, guided the development of our collective thought processes into the creation, growth and completion of the article.

Thanks also to Samson Mwaka for the beautiful design concept and Ljiljana Pavkov for layout and graphic design.

## Suggested Citation

Community for Understanding Scale Up (2021). “Enhancing Social Norms Programs: An Invitation to Rethink ‘Scaling Up’ from a Feminist Perspective.” Community for Understanding Scale Up.





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