

# **The Social Change Matrix**

A simple model of social change for strategic action

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**a Principle to Practice white paper**

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# The Social Change Matrix

A simple model of social change for strategic action

This paper describes a simple model<sup>1</sup> of social change. It is used by activists and advocates to develop their strategies and to better deploy their limited resources. The Social Change Matrix is both descriptive, in that it can be used to analyze your current efforts and where they may be falling short, and strategic, in that it can be used to help think through how to achieve your goals.

The Matrix is grounded in the experience of over a thousand activist and advocacy organizations all over the world in challenging and difficult contexts. This model is useful for anyone interested in creating change in their communities or the world.

## More and Key

All social change activities are based on one of two approaches related to *who* needs to be engaged for social change to take place.

- **More people approaches** aim to engage large numbers of people in actions to promote change. Activists or organizers who take this approach believe that social change movements can only be built if many people become active in the process, i.e. if there is broad involvement of “the people.”

*Change occurs if we have enough people.*

- **Key people approaches** focus on involving particular people, or groups of people, deemed critical to the social change because of their leverage or their roles. “Key people” strategies are based on the belief that without the involvement of these individuals or groups no real progress can be made toward social change.

*Change occurs if we have the right people.*

Who is “key” always depends on the particular context and what your goal is. Key people may be political leaders, people with leverage on broad constituencies (e.g. religious, business, or labor leaders), or others necessary to any agreement. They may also be important groups. These might be key entry points for the desired change (e.g. teachers, police officers, etc). Or they may be key because they are otherwise involved in the issue (e.g. unemployed young men).

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<sup>1</sup> This model is based on the work collected in *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners* by Mary B. Anderson and Lara Olson (Collaborative for Development Action, 2003). This paper describes the Social Change Matrix after more than a decade of deliberate and reflective work with the model.

## Individual/Personal and Socio-political

All social change activities can be directed at two basic levels: the individual/personal level and/or the socio-political level.

- Programs that work at the **individual/personal level** seek to change the attitudes, values, perceptions or circumstances of individuals, on the belief that change is possible only if the hearts, minds, and behavior of individuals are changed. Work at this level is focused on the people involved.

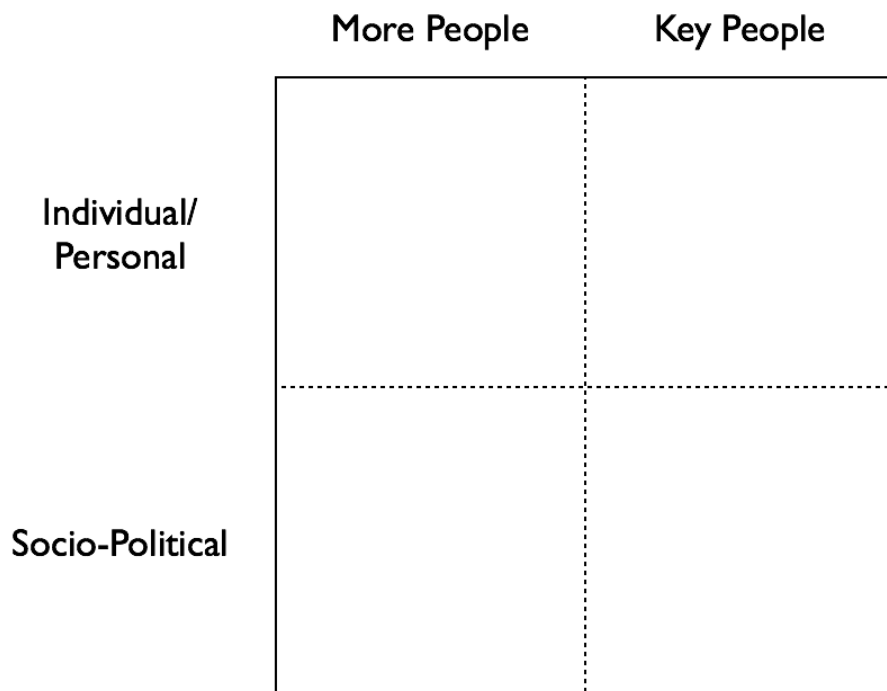
*Change occurs when we change minds.*

- Programs that concentrate at the **socio-political level** try to change socio-political or institutional structures and systems. These programs aim to support the creation or reform of institutions and/or to institutionalize certain policies. Work at this level, while obviously still with people, is focused on the structures.

*Change occurs when we change systems.*

These four concepts of change can be represented in a four-cell Matrix.

Social Change Matrix



## You Need All Four

Work that stays within any one quadrant of the matrix is not enough to build momentum for significant change. Social change requires that many levels and areas of a society be involved in the activities and institutions that both carry out the change and that maintain it. Any individual program or effort aiming to change a community or a society will only succeed if its effects transfer across to the other quadrants of the matrix.

Efforts in one quadrant need to be *linked* to efforts in the others.

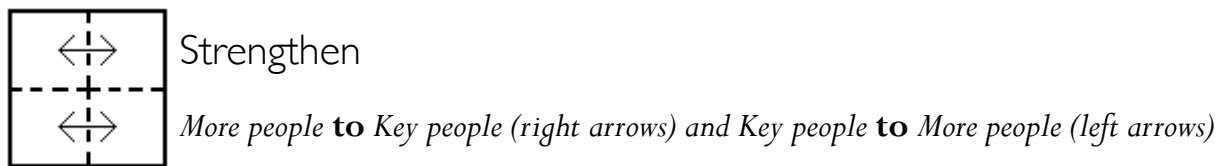
## You, Personally, Don't Need to Work in All Four

You can, of course, develop a social change effort that deliberately targets all four quadrants. But an individual organization or program or effort does not need to try to cover all four quadrants. It can focus on only one quadrant either because of a specific mandate or its expertise.

At the same time, it can be *linked* with other organizations or efforts focusing their work on other quadrants. It is always useful to find others working on the same or similar issues, though with different emphases and strategies, and to engage with them. Remaining isolated from each other reduces the likelihood of any effort having significant effect.

Three kinds of linkages are particularly important for programs to have an impact on social change: strengthening linkages, linkages required for success, and linkages required for sustainability.

## The Importance of Linkages (or, "The Arrows")

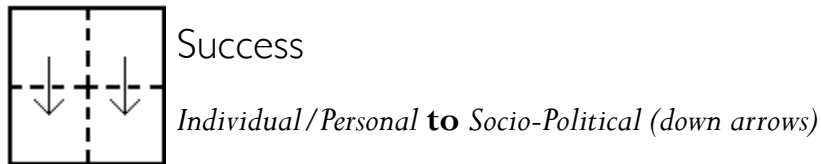


Activities to engage More People must link, strategically, to activities to engage Key People, and Key People activities must link strategically to activities to engage More People, if they are to be effective in moving toward social change. In order to create change, we need to look across the quadrants to seek out allies. By finding ways to link our activities, we strengthen both our own efforts and our mutual ones.

Approaches that concentrate on More People but do nothing to link to or affect Key People, as well as strategies that focus on Key People but do not include or affect More People, do not result in significant, lasting social change. An inability to find or to link with allies weakens our efforts.

For change to happen, we must engage both More People and Key People.

It is very common to find activists working for non-governmental organizations concentrating on More People, while diplomats and academics have a tendency to concentrate on Key People. People who are themselves Key People also have a strong tendency to concentrate on Key People. These efforts and their lack of linkage explain the failure of so many movements to have lasting effect.



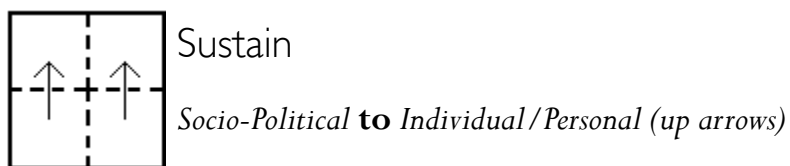
Efforts that focus on change at the Individual/Personal level (i.e. the upper half of the matrix), but that never link or translate into action at the Socio-Political level have **no discernible effect**. For significant change to happen, we *must* move into the Socio-Political level.

Social change efforts that focus on building relationships and trust, increasing hope that change is possible, often produce dramatic transformations in attitudes, perceptions and trust. These are good things! But they are not enough to create broad change. The evidence shows that impacts for broader change become significant only if these personal transformations are translated into actions and activities at the socio-political level.

Even when efforts at the Individual/Personal level have positive effects on individuals, the lack of real, significant change can also lead to disillusionment and burnout. Unfortunately, a significant amount of work towards change gets stuck at the Individual/Personal Level.

This cannot be stressed enough: Efforts that remain focused on the Individual/Personal level *do not* lead to social change.

Social change *only* occurs at the Socio-Political level.



The linkage from the Socio-Political to the Individual/Personal level is necessary to ensure that socio-political changes are internalized in the behavior and attitudes of individuals in order to be durable and sustainable. For change to last, we must move into the Individual/Personal level.

Initial gains can be lost if the work fails to have some way of bringing the socio-political back into individual lives.

This can occur through raising awareness, embedding expectations, or establishing procedures or routines (e.g. changing laws).

### **Putting Linkages into “Matrix Speak”**

- Left and right arrows are important for strengthening. We must bring Key People together with More People.
- Down arrows are critical for success. We must focus on linking to the Socio-Political level.
- Up arrows are important to increase the sustainability of our efforts. As we achieve our early goals, we must plan for the ongoing support and continuation of our efforts.

### **What is a Linkage?**

A person. An active, consciously engaged person, or group of people, serves as the link between quadrants.

Links from More to Key, Key to More could include introductions, information, appreciation, leadership.

Links from Individual/Personal to Socio-Political could include organizing, building, walking with, witnessing.

Links from Socio-Political to Individual/Personal could include teaching and training, procedures, information, and media.

### **It Does Not Matter Where You Start**

No quadrant is more important than any other. Even though “success” comes from change at the Socio-Political level, in order to get to that change, work needs to be carried out in all four quadrants.

Any effort toward social change can begin in any quadrant. There are a nearly infinite number of tactics that can be used to create change. However, all efforts must find ways to move beyond the quadrant where they start. Failure to move from quadrant to quadrant will result in no significant and lasting social change.

Another way of thinking about this is that the most important quadrant is the one you aren't working in. This is not to say you should shift your efforts wholesale to another quadrant—your work has the potential to be important—it is by making explicit linkages that your efforts come to fruition.

## Goals

It is crucial that goals be defined as socio-political change. Changes at the individual/personal level are not societal and do not fundamentally change the circumstances of communities. How is the change described? A goal described as “changing attitudes” or “educating citizens/politicians” or “building life skills” is in the upper half of the Matrix and will not result in social change no matter how well designed.

## Hope Lines (hope is not a strategy)

Often an organization or activist describes an effort and locates it clearly in one quadrant on the matrix, but then ends the description with the phrase, “and hopefully this will lead to an impact on [another quadrant]”. Hope lines, as they are called, are imagined linkages. It is often expected that a lot of work in one quadrant will somehow create an effort or change in another. It must be emphasized that this does not happen.

There is no linkage between quadrants without specific, intentionally designed efforts. If there is no activity linking efforts, there is no linkage. If there is no linkage, then efforts toward social change will not succeed. Hope is not a strategy.

Phrases and words to watch out for include: “hopefully”, “it is likely”, “I assume” or “it is a reasonable assumption”; “I expect”, “we anticipate”. We need to place our focus on assuring that the links across quadrants are, in fact, forged and that our efforts are, in fact, having an impact.

## The Three Linkages as Strategic Phases

The three linkages (Strengthen, Success, and Sustain) can also be thought of as strategic phases for the sequencing of social change efforts.

In the first phase, Strengthen, it is important to create the links between More People and Key People in order to strengthen the effort.

In the second phase, Success, an effort should concentrate on mobilizing the Individual/Personal changes into more systemic Socio-Political changes in order to achieve success.

In the third phase, Sustain, new or strengthened institutions or movements sustain the change by ongoing encouragement and inspiration of the Individual/Personal level.



These three phases can create a virtuous cycle for significant, positive, lasting change when a sustain phase can be developed back into a strengthen phase.

### More on “More” and “Key” and the “Off Switch”

In general, “More” means increasing numbers of people and “Key” means targeting specific, limited numbers of people. In practice, the line between the two can be blurry—and that’s OK. The model should help you make sense of your situation, but shouldn’t limit your understanding.

More People strategies generally attempt to mobilize or recruit more and more people. This can be by appealing to people as likeminded individuals or by building coalitions of groups.

Key People strategies attempt to identify the crucial people, without whom an agreement or a change could not happen. As mentioned above, these can sometimes be quite large groups, thus some of the confusion with More People strategies. Yet, Key People strategies are specifically not targeting everyone or every group.

It is often useful to think about Key People as those who can block the change effort, not just those whose support is necessary.

*Key People hold the “off switch”.*

### Theories of Change and the Social Change Matrix

The Matrix emerged out of an attempt to compare organizational and project level “theories of change”. People around the world working on social change are doing a lot of unrelated things with differing levels of success. In order to figure out what works and why, it was necessary to develop a method—the Matrix—for comparing conceptual frameworks about change.

Each quadrant of the Matrix represents one of the broad Theories of Change that underlie social change efforts. One common usage for the Matrix is to map an organization’s Theory of Change in order to find where it sits and what quadrants it is missing.

A key insight that has emerged from this is that the concept of “Theory of Change” is not an effective planning process. In practice, “Theory of Change” encourages organizations and individuals to narrow their thinking into a single quadrant. As noted, work in one quadrant does not lead to significant, lasting change. Therefore, virtually all Theories of Change, because they are located in only one (or very occasionally two) quadrants are incomplete and insufficient for accomplishing their stated social change goals.

Additionally, this narrowing of focus to a single quadrant leads people to dismiss those working in other quadrants as ineffective.

Rather than a “Theory of Change”, activists need a strategy toward change, whereby all four quadrants are engaged. They need to forge linkages across the quadrants, without which our strength is diminished, success will remain elusive, and our efforts will not be sustained.

## **A Powerful Tool**

The Social Change Matrix is a powerful tool for working on change anywhere and for any purpose, from peacebuilding and advocacy, to diplomacy and social or economic development, to internal organizational and institutional change.

Use the Matrix analytically, to find in which quadrant your efforts or activities are currently focused and which quadrants you are missing. This may inform you about an unspoken or implicit “theory of change” within your organization.

Use it to inform your observation of the context in order to find who else is working on similar or related issues. Find ways to cross the quadrants by finding people who can act as linkages and strengthen both your work and that of others.

Use the Matrix strategically, to plan your efforts to make sure they affect all four quadrants. Even the smallest activities can be planned to touch on more than one quadrant (and even all four if you unleash your creativity).

The very best users of the Matrix plan their efforts with an eye to all four quadrants. They determine in which quadrant their goal lies and they plan how to bring actions and allies in the other quadrants to bear. They aim to create activities that engage as many quadrants as possible, as well as sequencing their goals to align with the concept of Strengthen-Success-Sustain-Strengthen. By using the Matrix to make sure even the smallest activities touch across multiple quadrants, every event, activity, or process increases in power.

These exceptional agents of change find the linkages that carry motivation, information, strategies, and support across the quadrants. Many of them take on the role of linkage themselves, generating the connections and facilitating the relationships necessary for broad social change.

As one experienced activist said to me when her latest effort was successful, “the Social Change Matrix is magic.”