

# The Foundation Review

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Volume 15 | Issue 2

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6-2023

## Book Review: Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years

Kennedy Musyoka  
*James Madison University*

Emily Irungu  
*James Madison University*

Margaret F. Sloan  
*James Madison University*

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### Recommended Citation

Musyoka, K., Irungu, E., & Sloan, M. F. (2023). Book Review: Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years. *The Foundation Review*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1657>

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# Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years

Book Review by Kennedy Musyoka, M.B.A., Emily Irungu, M.B.A., and Margaret F. Sloan, Ph.D.,  
James Madison University

*Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years* details the mission and strategies of The Nicholson Foundation during its 20-year history of pursuing systems-level change for vulnerable populations. A well-choreographed collaborative project spearheaded by Jan Nicholson, president of the Foundation's board of trustees, and board chair Barbara Nicholson McFadyen, the book presents the major initiatives of the Foundation from its creation in 2002 to the sunset of its activities in 2021. By exploring the Foundation's key successes, the book offers a model for both effective community engagement and change and the thoughtful and purposeful closure of a foundation.

*Changing Systems, Changing Lives* seeks to share The Nicholson Foundation's experience primarily with a broad audience of changemakers, most specifically other foundations and community organizations. It offers them vital lessons in how to bring forth sustainable impact while remaining cognizant of their environment as they operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. The authors also encourage a paradigm shift among foundations — from an in-perpetuity model to one of high-impact investing and the intentional spending down of assets — and show how The Nicholson Foundation accomplished that transition.

A brief overview of the Foundation's history is followed by thematic chapters that illustrate key



*Changing Systems, Changing Lives:  
Reflecting on 20 Years*  
The Nicholson Foundation, 2021  
Newark, NJ

strategies with specific examples of The Nicholson Foundation's work in the arts and in health care, particularly maternal and child health and well-being. The introduction outlines the strategies the Foundation developed to influence systems change, create sustainable progress, and foster the ability to work with parties holding different political viewpoints. These strategies included mission-driven decision-making, close collaboration with grantees, performance-based grantmaking, funding for innovative activities and initiatives, and building

relationships with stakeholders in government, business, and the nonprofit sector.

Chapter One details the Foundation's developmental stages in four sections that cover each era's characteristics and milestones, along with a list of leaders and their contributions. What follows are six chapters organized thematically:

- *Engaging with government for systems change.* Chapter Two describes how the Foundation partnered with government officials as well as academics, clinicians, and social workers to develop an In-Home Recovery Model and its Youth Employment and Education Success Center. From both initiatives, lessons are drawn about what is involved in navigating complex political systems and ideologies, recognizing partners' unique and important roles, and remaining nimble during the process of building consensus.

- *Elevating best practices and building evidence.* Chapter Three's theme is shaped by The Nicholson Foundation's efforts to guide service providers' work, partnerships, and policy by relying on evidence-based models and techniques. This approach led to the pilot of Project ECHO, an innovative, integrated telementoring strategy that enabled efficiencies in health care delivery, and to strategies incorporating the contributions of numerous experts in each layer of a system that require changemakers to take the long view in gathering and utilizing evidence. Success, the authors emphasize, relies on making decisions that are driven by data and by careful evaluation of outcomes. There is valuable guidance on how to collect and use data to inform program development and evaluation, track progress, shape strategy, and ensure continuous learning — all key to effective systems-change efforts.
- *Creating and nurturing effective partnerships.* As Chapter Four relates, collaboration and partnerships enabled the Foundation to benefit from a range of skills and experience and build grantee capacity to ensure sustainable work. The story of The Nicholson Foundation is one of identifying, building, and sustaining effective partnerships that enhance an organization's visibility and allow for diverse perspectives and purposes to be addressed as knowledge is shared and difficult issues are explored. The Foundation initially established strong partnerships with such organizations as the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute and its partner, the Medicaid Policy Center; the Center for Care Innovations in Oakland, California; and St. Joseph's Hospital in Paterson, New Jersey, to identify needs, resources, and opportunities, and then joined with them to build programs. Many of those programs established with The Nicholson Foundation's financial support continue into the present due in part to long-term partnerships.
- *Investing in organizational nuts and bolts.* While the Foundation embraced a big-picture systems perspective, it also attended

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to the basic needs of organizations within those systems. With its focus on strategic grantmaking, Chapter Five shares the Foundation's experience with capacity building — funding staff growth, board development, and equipment and supplies — and encourages support for grant writing, strategic planning, and coalition development. The Nicholson Foundation also worked with grantees to define programming, identify outcomes, and support ongoing community change through evaluation and organizational learning.

- *Tackling complex problems through multiple and complementary strategies.* Chapter Six outlines how the Foundation sought solutions to the complex problems inherent in administering early childhood care and education and illustrates how, by viewing the issue through the lenses of social services and health care, partners were able to promote access, quality, equity, and affordability. The Nicholson Foundation fostered the development of six complementary projects supporting child health and wellness and worked to revive New Jersey's Center for Family Services' one-stop service locations across the state. The Foundation also took a multipronged approach to creating systems of quality maternal care by convening partners that

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addressed different aspects of maternal health and using clear and consistent messaging to advocate with policymakers.

- *Developing future leaders.* Chapter 7 emphasizes that strong, committed leadership is paramount in effecting change, and offers foundations a practical guide to both effectively leading change efforts and developing future leaders, thereby enhancing the chances of successful, sustainable initiatives. Training should emphasize skills in and the need for commitment to the process of bringing diverse stakeholders together to achieve a shared goal. The authors detail how The Nicholson Foundation's leaders directed not only the Foundation's course, but also the course of the systems they influenced.

The book, while written by numerous authors, provides a cohesive narrative that employs a case-study approach exploring the richness and depth of relationships within a specific context. Its jargon-free, "storytelling" approach will engage practitioners and academics and creates a text accessible to an even broader readership. Additionally, the end of each chapter contains takeaways highlighting key insights and lessons that drive home the applicability of the cases to other policy areas. While the findings are not wholly generalizable to organizations without

similar influence or resources, the lessons presented apply across a range of policy systems.

It remains up to other scholars to empirically test concepts or create theory based on this work. While it presents as the story of one foundation, *Changing Systems, Changing Lives* really explains the larger systems in which The Nicholson Foundation, as a convenor and facilitator, played a leadership role. The Foundation's work was primarily sited in New Jersey with a brief chapter on its arts project in North Carolina, but the strategies The Nicholson Foundation employed can be applied across multiple policy arenas and state contexts. This one-state context may not be replicable elsewhere because of variations in support networks, policymaking, and policy context. However, foundations everywhere can use this book to gain knowledge and information that could prove instrumental in building their arguments for change. And this case study can be used as a teaching tool and a practical example in matters relating to leadership, philanthropy, voluntary action, public administration, and the nonprofit sector.

*Changing Systems, Changing Lives* also offers an alternative to the in-perpetuity model that dominates the foundation landscape. It urges grantmakers to focus on making an impact rather than on their own longevity. Too, in detailing the story of The Nicholson Foundation's own emphases on health and wellness among vulnerable populations, the book provides a holistic overview of the social determinants of health and the importance of addressing these factors to improve quality of life. It touches on structural barriers to health and adeptly highlights the importance of an integrated, collaborative approach to complex health and social issues by exemplifying successful systems-level initiatives through collaborations with government agencies, health care providers, social service organizations, and community resources.

Overall, the book presents a persuasive argument that systems change is achievable for

equitable and sustainable improvement in health and social outcomes.

*Changing Systems, Changing Lives* can be accessed online, or a free print copy requested at <https://www.thenicholsonfoundation.org/changinglives/>

**Kennedy Musyoka, M.B.A.**, is a Ph.D. student at the School of Strategic Leadership Studies at James Madison University and a doctoral assistant at the university's College of Business.

**Emily Irungu, M.B.A.**, is a Ph.D. student at the School of Strategic Leadership Studies at James Madison University and doctoral assistant at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery.

**Margaret F. Sloan, Ph.D.**, is a professor and director of the School of Strategic Leadership Studies at James Madison University.