

# Six Phases for Building Sustainable Impact through Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

## What is policy, systems, and environmental change?

Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change is an important approach to ensure everyone has the opportunity for optimal health. PSE changes influence laws, shape physical landscapes, and improve institutions to make healthy living easier by tackling the root causes of health inequities. Achieving and sustaining PSE change is complex, and organizations and communities often require support throughout the process.

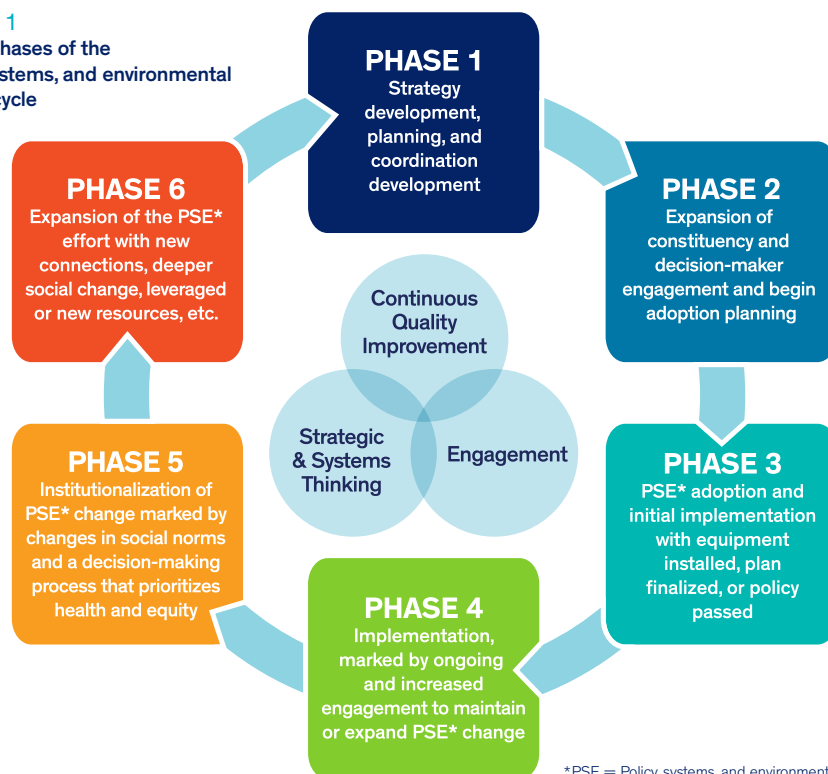
An understanding of how PSE change occurs, what has been successful in catalyzing it, and what has been successful in sustaining it over time can help those embarking upon PSE change work to increase their effectiveness and impact. Most research focuses on specific policy or systems changes over a short time period (e.g., 1-2 years). Less is known about how organizations and communities address multiple PSE changes simultaneously over a long period of time (e.g., 5-10 years). This *Action Learning Brief* builds on the first brief in this series, which defines PSE change. This brief provides practical guidance on defining and applying the six phases of PSE change that can help organizations and their technical assistance (TA) providers expand their efforts and build sustainable impact.

## What are the six phases of change?

Evaluation research at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health in collaboration with the Cook County Department of Public Health identified six phases to conducting PSE change (<https://illinoisprc.org>). Figure 1 below demonstrates the phases of the change cycle. The following pages describe and provide local examples for each phase. This information is intended to help organizations identify what types of guidance and TA are needed to advance and sustain PSE change.

**FIGURE 1**

The six phases of the policy, systems, and environmental change cycle



\*PSE = Policy, systems, and environmental

## Before the six phase process begins

The six phases of PSE change require a baseline level of readiness, commitment, capacity, and knowledge. The following should be in place before an entity begins Phase 1 of the PSE change process:

- Ongoing engagement between the agency or agencies hoping to adopt a PSE change and its partners, who may provide guidance, assistance, and expertise along the way;
- Conversations with the agency's key stakeholders, including community members, to assess the interest, readiness, and capacity for PSE adoption and implementation; and
- Agreement and a shared commitment to the overall goals of PSE adoption among a key group of agency and partner stakeholders.

## Ongoing activities

Although each PSE change phase focuses on a core set of distinct activities, all phases include: 1) Ongoing **engagement** and relationship building among key stakeholders at the agency, within the community, and with partners from other communities, if appropriate; 2) Ongoing reflection on lessons learned, often through **continuous quality improvement (CQI)** and/or evaluation to monitor progress, promote learning and reflection, and make necessary changes to approaches, practices, etc.; and 3) Continued use of a **strategic and systems thinking** to connect organizations and partners across the system to new opportunities; identify areas of tension and opportunity for PSE change; ensure PSE goals are aligned with other community goals; and ensure activities are attuned to contextual factors at the community, regional, state, or national levels.

### PHASE 1

#### Strategy development

Having a shared long-term strategic approach and clear organizing structure can help sustain PSE change. Steps might include: 1) Gathering quantitative and qualitative data to assess resources, needs, the interests of key stakeholders who are working toward similar goals, and progress to reach stated goals; 2) Understanding the policymaking or adoption process in the jurisdiction, including required language, steps in the process, required protocols and approvals, and timelines; 3) Together with input from key stakeholders, identifying initial priorities and secondary priorities to help focus the work, developing a long-range plan and theory of change to ensure partners are working together, and helping coordinate resources to accomplish this shared vision; and 4) Establishing a partnership structure with operating principles, a charter, roles and responsibilities, and a meeting schedule that helps to keep people organized. TA can focus on Baseline Readiness Assessment, Change Leadership, Strategic Management, Power Analysis and Theory of Change Planning, and Coalition/Collaborative Building Skills.

### PHASE 2

#### Expand constituency and decision-maker engagement and begin adoption planning

Engagement is one of the most important aspects of PSE change and should start early in the PSE change process. At this stage, steps might include: 1) Expanding overall support, including finding additional champions or partners and obtaining decision-maker support; 2) Identifying any champions or leaders to serve as the gatekeeper to engage decision makers; and 3) Building on engagement with community groups and facilitating opportunities for decision-makers to hear from them. Constituent and partner attendance at key meetings, events, and educational workshops should occur to increase awareness of the key issues. This phase and activity is particularly important in suburban or rural areas where there are multiple disparate networks and interested parties that need to be heard. All sectors, voices, and diverse partners should be included. Any opposing perspective should be considered to help plan for counter arguments. TA is often needed to develop messages, talking points, and set up communication platforms to recruit support and share actions plans.

EXAMPLES IN THE FIELD: Fresh Produce at Corner Stores	
<b>Before the process begins</b>	An assessment is conducted with key stakeholders, including corner store owners to assess needs and interest in the healthy corner store initiative.
<b>Ongoing</b>	Ongoing conversations occur among key stakeholders, including technical assistance (TA) providers and corner store owners and other community-based partners who may be able to help provide support at different stages.
<b>PHASE 1</b>	An expert organization from another city who has been working on this issue is consulted to provide planning expertise for local implementation.
<b>PHASE 2</b>	Corner store owners are further engaged, presented with a plan for implementation, and invited to participate in an initiative to stock healthier options on their shelves.
<b>PHASE 3</b>	Corner store owners decide to take part. They receive training, support, supplies, and signage. They receive small amounts of healthy foods from distributors on a pilot basis.
<b>PHASE 4</b>	Site visits are conducted, community tasting events are held, signage is updated, and purchasing is monitored. TA helps to address challenges.
<b>PHASE 5</b>	Corner stores make arrangements with distributors for ongoing delivery of healthy items.
<b>PHASE 6</b>	Several partners begin working with local schools and community-based organizations on a joint nutrition education campaign to educate children about healthy food available for purchase in local corner stores.

## PHASE 3

### Adoption and initial implementation

This phase consists of the preparation for and actual passing or adoption of a formal PSE change as well as celebration and acknowledgement of success. Expert and evidence-based fact sheets, testimony, talking points, letters to the editor, and continued education are essential to increase momentum for the PSE change. TA is needed by stakeholders during this phase to provide state and national evidence demonstrating policy impact; any materials that support policy implementation; and lessons learned on how to address challenges. Information provided may include local data or comparative organizations and/or communities where success has occurred.

## PHASE 4

### Implementation

Once PSE change occurs, ongoing implementation of the change may be difficult. Often, additional systems or environmental changes are needed to maintain or advance the work. Decision-makers and individuals previously involved leave, and newcomers need to know why the PSE change is important. TA during this phase is needed to maintain or increase support for policy implementation. TA might include: ongoing training; check-ins with organizations to help problem solve; and event planning to raise awareness of the PSE change.

## PHASE 5

### Institutionalization

This phase involves creating an overall more deeply-embedded commitment by the agency to the PSE change work. This means examining the ways in which decisions are made, and how policy and protocols throughout the organization could be changed to provide support for human resource, fiscal, or capacity building commitments. This examination can deepen or expand the existing PSE change. A PSE change in this phase must be steeped in the culture of the organization in order to outlive changes in administration and become part of standard operating procedures. TA might include a systems-change assessment training in the organization to identify potential changes in the culture and decision-making processes.

## PHASE 6

### Expansion

PSE change expansion includes extending the PSE change with new endeavors, elements, and partners beyond the original intent and/or according to the strategic plan. This may involve making improvements or changes to the existing PSE change based on evaluation and performance data. This might also include broadening an organization or community's mission and partners for additional PSE change and/or expanding the effort outside the original scope. TA providers can facilitate a stakeholder assessment to determine which partners may bring new resources, ideas, or support to expand the changes; or they may facilitate a collaborative approach to strategic planning among many partners.

EXAMPLES IN THE FIELD: Enhanced Physical Education/ Physical Activity	
<b>Before the process begins</b>	A state level policy is passed and state and local partners hold initial conversations about implementation of the policy.
<b>Ongoing</b>	Key stakeholders, including technical assistance (TA) providers, content experts, and state, regional, and school-level stakeholders meet frequently in order to assess progress, needs, and opportunities.
<b>PHASE 1</b>	Physical education (PE) and physical activity (PA) state leaders and partners work with the independent school district and regional partners to plan a strategy to engage schools/districts and train and support school staff.
<b>PHASE 2</b>	School/district leaders are informed about the new state PE policy and the importance of PE/PA, the data linking it to achievement, and the opportunities for their staff to be trained for school compliance.
<b>PHASE 3</b>	PE teachers are trained on new curriculum; curriculum is made available to schools; and school schedules are adjusted to ensure each child receives PE.
<b>PHASE 4</b>	TA visits are conducted and support is provided to help staff troubleshoot barriers, etc.
<b>PHASE 5</b>	School budgets ensure curriculum materials and teacher trainings are supported on a regular basis.
<b>PHASE 6</b>	Schools gets involved with other partners to help plan district or community-wide PE/PA endeavors.



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## SUGGESTED CITATION

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## EXAMPLES IN THE FIELD: Complete Streets Plans in Municipalities

<b>Before the process begins</b>	An assessment of infrastructure, planning, and community needs is initiated to gauge interest and specific needs around the built environment.
<b>Ongoing</b>	Ongoing conversations occur among key stakeholders including technical assistance (TA) providers, local advocacy groups with shared interests, key elected officials, and others to assess progress and next steps.
<b>PHASE 1</b>	TA from outside the community supports creation of a walking and bicycling plan; community meetings, assessments, and expert advice inform the plan.
<b>PHASE 2</b>	Experts engage trustees, managers, the mayor, or other elected officials; community groups, advocacy groups, and others garner support for the plan's adoption. Presentations at board meetings and other public forums garner and demonstrate support in advance of the final decision.
<b>PHASE 3</b>	The plan is formally adopted by the trustees, managers, or other voting body.
<b>PHASE 4</b>	Funding is identified and/or applied for in order to implement phases of the walking and bicycling plan.
<b>PHASE 5</b>	Community and advocacy groups continue to ensure that later phases of the plan are implemented.
<b>PHASE 6</b>	The plan is expanded upon and/or connected to adjacent communities and plans. For example, a bike path that runs through multiple communities is built up around one community's initial plan.