new roots INSTITUTE

THEORIES OF CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

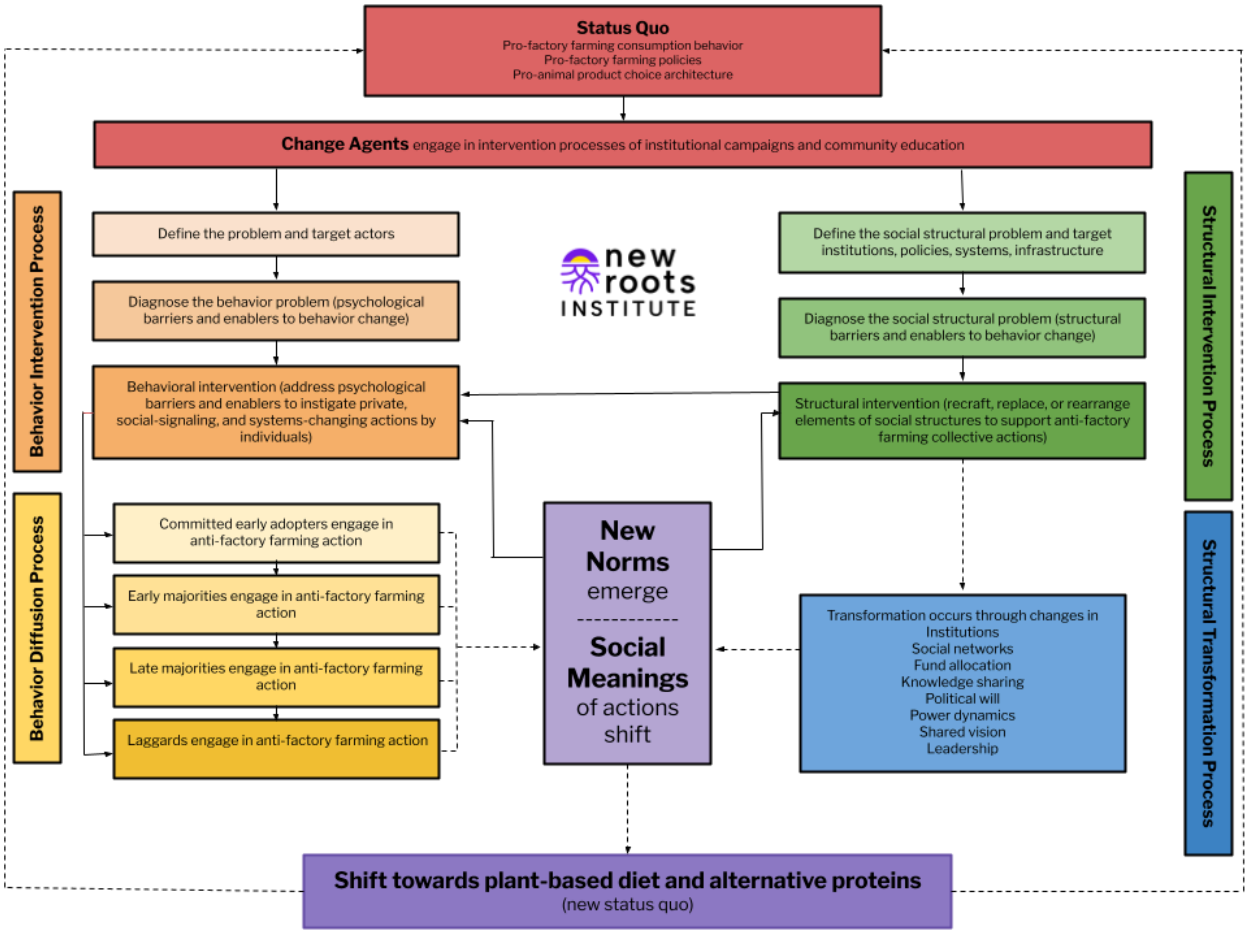
New Roots Institute operates with two interconnected theories of change: a broader, movement-level theory and a more targeted campus-level theory of change.

The broader theory outlines how we cultivate long-term impact by recruiting motivated students, training them as leaders, and supporting their advocacy beyond campus, ultimately influencing public institutions, policy, and culture to challenge factory farming.

Our campus-level theory of change zooms in on how change begins in school settings, where fellows disrupt the invisibility of factory farming, shift peer norms, and run campaigns that make plant-based options more accessible. Schools serve as the first arena where fellows gain organizing experience, build credibility, and catalyze change from within their communities.

Having both theories allows us to track near-term, place-based outcomes in schools while aligning them with a long-term strategy for systemic, scalable impact for animals across sectors and institutions.

CAMPUS-LEVEL THEORY OF CHANGE



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Summary

Consumption of factory-farmed animals, dairy, and eggs is our current status quo. To shift this norm, our programs focus on recruiting the most motivated high school and college students, educating them on the impacts of factory farming, and training them to change the structures and norms in their schools and communities. These students act as change agents to increase social disapproval around factory farming, while simultaneously making alternatives easily accessible through campaigns, lobbying in governmental bodies, and developing plant-based and cultivated meat products. The combination of behavioral and structural interventions gradually shift social norms in the change agents' communities away

from the current status quo. As new social norms emerge in the communities, alternatives to factory farming become more popular, moving us away from the destructive and inhumane system.

Status Quo

Summary:

The status quo favors the (pervasively unquestioned) consumption of factory-farmed animals, dairy, and eggs.

1. **Animal products are often the default** and the majority of options in institutions such as schools and businesses.
2. Many restaurants have **few, if any, plant-based options that appeal to the mainstream consumer**.
3. **Governmental policies keep factory-farmed animal products cheap, accessible, and the norm** (e.g. checkoff programs, subsidies, ag-gag laws, etc.).
4. **Consuming animal products from factory farms is considered morally neutral**. In all but the most progressive circles, consumers do not experience social disapproval due to the ethical or environmental implications.
5. **Misconceptions around the financial and health costs of eating plant-based perpetuate consumption of animal-based foods, increasing demand for factory farms.**
6. **A minority of the United States is aware that animal agriculture is a significant contributor to climate change** or that it causes other significant environmental damage to both land and marine ecosystems.

Change Agents

Summary:

Trained high school and college fellows work both independently and with partner organizations to shift attitudes, behaviors, and structures, primarily through social-signaling and system-changing actions

Context:

Change agents must intervene on both the individual and structural levels in order to shift the cultural values and social meanings undergirding the status quo. Without a shift in cultural values and social meanings, ostensible successes at one level or the other won't

gain long-term traction. There are three types of actions (Naito 2022) that change agents can pursue, preferably simultaneously:

- *Private actions* are behaviors, such as conscious reduction of animal-based foods, that people privately conduct to lessen their personal impacts. These actions potentially alter demand but may not ripple outwards through social networks, and may only indirectly address structural problems.
- *Social-signaling* actions are behaviors that signal someone's values, attitudes, identities, and opinions. Such behaviors could include 'liking' and sharing videos or plant-based meals on social media, participating in Meatless Monday or Veganuary, and wearing stickers, badges, and T-shirts with anti-speciesist messages. These actions can foster social norms aligned with vegan values.
- *System-changing* actions are behaviors that people collectively engage in with the intention of changing laws, policies, corporate actions, institutions, and infrastructure. Such behaviors include soliciting signatures for ballot initiatives like California's Prop 12, Greener by Default campaigns, or lobbying representatives. These actions can result in systemic changes through laws, institutions, and infrastructures, thereby influencing individuals' behaviors.

Behavior Intervention Process

Summary:

Our growing network of trained fellows employs private, social-signaling, and systems-changing actions to influence the social norms and food-choice architecture in their communities.

Key Psychological Barriers To Behavior Change:

While we cannot completely extricate structural-environmental and cultural factors from individuals' behavior, we can point to several influential psychological barriers, such as the belief that

- Animal-based food consumption is more normal and natural than a plant-based diet and is necessary for—rather than detrimental to—health
- Reducing or eliminating animal-based foods will lead to a reduction in pleasure
- Consuming animal-based foods is necessary to maintain an accepted cultural or gender identity and, therefore, dietary change would lead to ostracization or diminished status
- Good, moral people, such as themselves, wouldn't do something so harmful to animals or the environment, so consuming animals-based foods can't be so harmful or morally wrong

Key Psychological Enablers To Behavior Change:

- Deeply ingrained—though often suppressed—values that include the protection of animals and the environment
- A desire to be healthy
- A growing normalization of plant-based eating
- Increasingly accessible and appealing plant-based options at grocery stores and restaurants
- A desire to reduce drivers of climate change

Behavioral Interventions:

- Empowers our fellows with a coherent and multifaceted narrative that connects their identities to taking action against animal agriculture
- Teaches our fellows effective communication skills to educate their communities on the impacts of factory farming
- Supports fellows through the process of advocating for increased plant-based options and other structural interventions in their institutions and in governmental bodies
- Fellows educate through both campaigns and, in some case, whole class lessons that use photos and videos along with peer-reviewed science to establish the destructive impacts of factory farming and invoke empathy and a sense of moral duty in the students
- The education encourages peers to discuss their personal and cultural values around social justice, health, and animal and environmental protection; to foster narratives of moral disapproval and the desire to take action; and to facilitate discussions that question the validity of the beliefs enumerated in the key psychological barriers section above

Context:

Research shows that human decisions are subject to cognitive biases and heuristics. Interventions that harness cognitive biases and heuristics can produce behavior change. Change agents must first understand why people behave the way they do and identify psychological barriers and enablers for behavior change before designing interventions (Datta and Mullainathan 2014; White et al. 2019). Some of the psychological interventions we use include the following:

- Messaging that uses iconic photos and narratives of animals and workers in factory farms and slaughterhouses—as well as of environmental impacts—to trigger emotional reactions and draw attention more effectively than mere presentation of facts and statistics (Slovic et al. 2017).
- Leveraging injunctive social norms and group identity through lessons/lines of inquiry that require students to explicitly connect their values and identity to a rejection of animal agriculture rather than have students listen to statistics and narratives that may be contextualized through normative schemata (Shakya et al. 2017; Young 2015).
- Changing default settings to reduce mental efforts in decision-making and nudge

people toward plant-based options (Shah and Oppenheimer 2008).

Structural Intervention Process

Summary:

New Roots Institute trains students to recognize the structures that require intervention, such as

- Limited accessibility of appealing plant-based alternatives compared to animal-based
- Artificially low prices of animal-based foods from factory farms and the government policies, including subsidies, that keep them low
- Lack of public knowledge about the impacts of the factory farming system on animals, the environment (including climate change), industry workers, and health, as well as the industry practices and government policies that maintain this ignorance
- Scalable production of cultivated meat

New Roots Institute supports fellows in

- Institutional campaigns that promote accessible and appetizing plant-based options at schools, workplaces, and other student groups
- Educating their communities through these campaigns and through other forms of educational outreach
- Lobbying representatives and working on legislation that makes factory farming/purchasing animal-based foods more costly while improving conditions for the farmed animals
- Connecting to work in mission-aligned and -adjacent organizations as well as companies developing alternative proteins

Context:

Change agents must understand how institutions, socioeconomic systems, power dynamics, infrastructures and technologies promote the conditions that perpetuate the status quo. Once they identify structural barriers and enablers for behavior change, they can target intervention points within social structures and intervene at different administrative and geographical scales.

Behavior Diffusion Process

Summary:

Our programs focus on motivating and supporting early adopters, whose values and identities we can more easily activate through our programs. Some of these early adopters become New Roots Institute fellows, working to increase social disapproval around factory farming. At the same time, they work to make alternatives easily accessible through campaigns, lobbying in governmental bodies, and developing plant-based and cultivated meat products.

Context:

These types of interventions accelerate the adoption of plant-based norms in the latter segments, who are more likely to shift behaviors based on social pressures, laws, and incentives (Berkowitz and Walker 1967; Cialdini and Goldstein 2004; Davis et al. 2018; Jayachandran et al. 2017; White et al. 2019). Importantly, changes in behavior can result in shifts in value orientations, attitudes, and motivations (Kendall and Raymond 2018; Sussman and Gifford 2019). As people adopt plant-based eating, they are likely to update their prior attitudes and beliefs to accord with a preference for animal and environmental protection since they now see themselves as "the kind of person who makes choices that help animals and the environment."

Structural Transformation Process

Summary:

Transformation occurs through changes in

- Schools and affiliated groups
- Social networks
- Knowledge sharing
- Political will
- Power dynamics
- Shared vision
- Leadership
- Fund allocation

Context:

Structural transformation requires sustained investments of capital and human resources. It's a slow and gradual process necessary for long-term change. These changes lead to the

emergence of new rules and structures that reinforce new norms and meanings around factory farming (Young 2015).

New Norms Emerge & Social Meanings Of Actions Shift → A New Status Quo Of Plant-Based Diets And Alternative Proteins

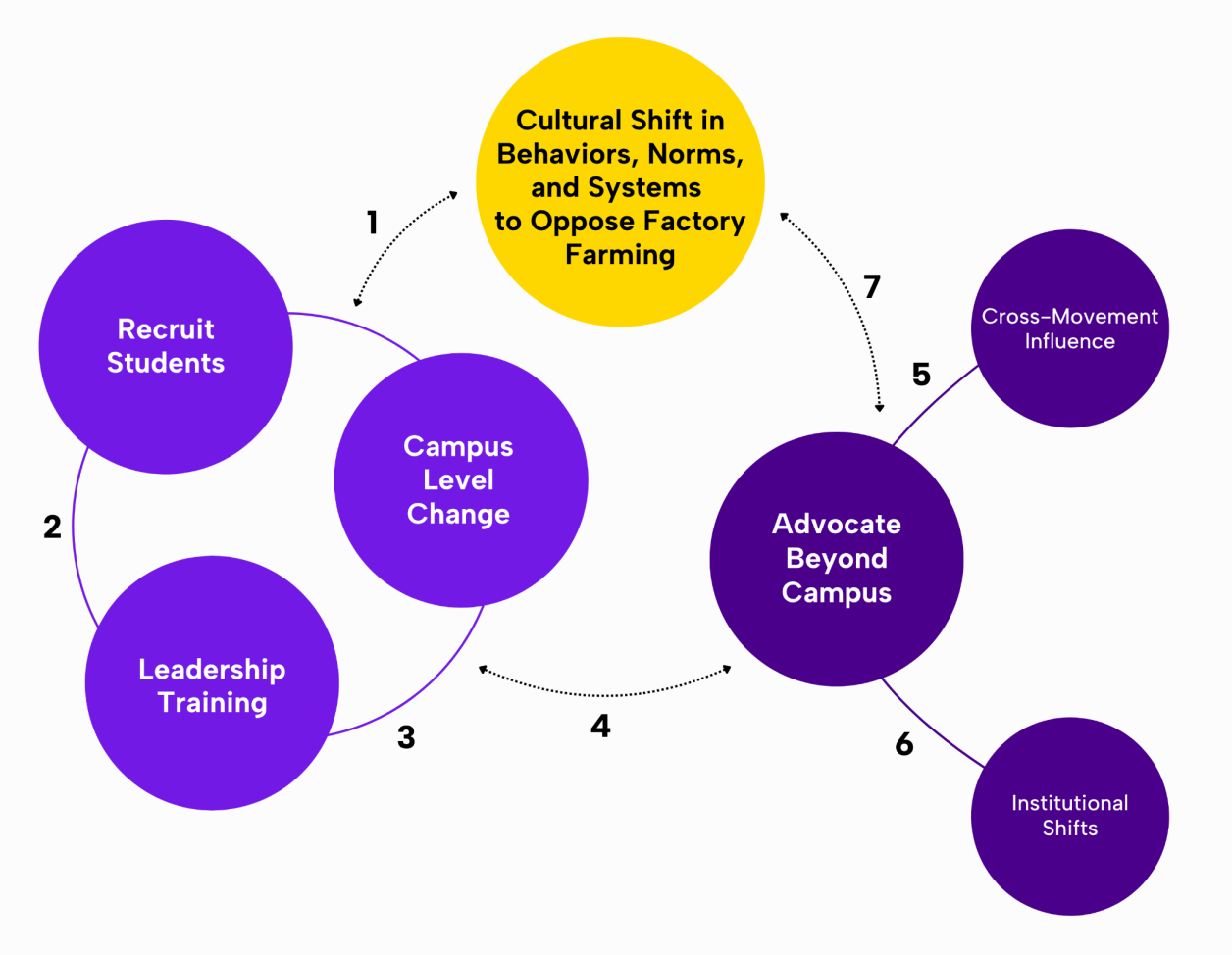
Summary:

Over time, with behavioral and structural interventions, supporting factory farming garners social disapproval, and alternatives to animal-based foods are normalized. As new social norms emerge, plant-based eating can become institutionalized, creating positive feedbacks that cement new practices.

Context:

Naito, et al. (2022) write, "Transformative change requires the diffusion of sustainable behaviors or actions from niche to mainstream populations. It also requires structural transformations that support a range of sustainable practices at the societal level. When widespread individual actions and structural changes occur simultaneously, meanings of action and norms can shift. Such a shift can lock in alternative development trajectories towards a sustainable future, updating existing behaviors and social structures and reinforcing pro-environmental values and practices across societies." The new norm promotes demand for more sustainable alternatives, a new set of rules and industry standards, and ultimately system-wide changes (Heidbreder et al. 2019).

MOVEMENT-LEVEL THEORY OF CHANGE



Recruitment of Motivated Students (1)

New Roots Institute begins by identifying and recruiting high school and college students who show a demonstrated interest in building a just and sustainable food system. These students often already hold strong values related to equity, justice, and sustainability and are engaged in adjacent social issues. Research shows that youth who are already civically inclined are more likely to internalize activist identities and sustain long-term engagement when supported with meaningful opportunities (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Ballard et al., 2017). Recruitment focuses not just on finding students who care, but those who are embedded in social networks where ideas and behaviors can diffuse to others (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Through this intentional recruitment approach, New Roots helps ensure that its future leaders are well-positioned to influence both peer groups and institutions.

Leadership Training for Effective Advocacy (2)

Once recruited, students are enrolled in a tiered development pipeline: the Leadership Academy (a 6-week summer program) and the Academic Year Fellowship. These programs are designed to build civic efficacy, critical consciousness, and practical advocacy skills. Fellows receive structured training in organizing fundamentals, systems thinking, public narrative, and campaign strategy. Just as crucially, they build relational literacy—the capacity to listen, collaborate, and navigate difference—necessary for coalition-building and long-term movement resilience. Social science research affirms that youth organizing programs that provide both identity-affirming and action-oriented components are especially effective at fostering durable political engagement (Kirshner, 2009; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The program is also designed around principles of distributed leadership, increasing each fellow's ability to lead initiatives within their context (Ganz, 2009).

Campus-Level Change (3)

Fellows put their training into action by designing and implementing campaigns on their campuses. These efforts range from securing plant-based menu changes and forming student clubs to passing food policy resolutions or convening awareness events. The campaigns serve as both learning opportunities and vehicles for cultural and institutional change. They help shift social norms, create public discourse around factory farming, and disrupt the invisibility of industrial agriculture within school environments. Research on complex contagions suggests that belief and behavior change—especially around ethical or identity-linked issues—requires repeated exposure within trusted networks, not just one-time interventions (Centola, 2018). Fellows' embedded presence in school communities is what makes this change possible.

Alumni Apply Advocacy Beyond Campus (4)

Graduates of the program carry forward both their skills and values. Many go on to leadership roles in environmental organizations, civic institutions, academic research, or public service. The advocacy frameworks developed at New Roots often become foundational to their worldview, equipping them to challenge dominant food paradigms and advocate for structural reform in diverse contexts (Snow et al., 1986). Because alumni are often active in multiple movements—including climate justice, racial justice, and public health—they bring a systems lens to their work. As they advance in their careers, they increasingly hold positional power to shift discourse, policy, or practice.

Cross-Movement Influence and Increased Movement Capacity (5)

Alumni extend the reach and credibility of animal advocacy by situating it within broader

justice and sustainability frameworks. They draw clear connections between factory farming and urgent global crises—such as antibiotic resistance, zoonotic pandemics, and environmental racism—thereby making the cause relevant to new constituencies (Jasper, 1997; Tilly & Wood, 2013). They also expand the movement's operational capacity by bringing animal advocacy into institutions like government agencies, universities, and nonprofits. This diversification of voice, identity, and tactic helps prevent insularity and increases cultural legitimacy.

Education Spurs Institutional Shifts (6)

Alumni not only continue to advocate—they educate. They introduce the realities of factory farming to colleagues, policymakers, faith leaders, and community groups through tailored messaging and relational advocacy. As awareness grows, these institutions begin to consider plant-based policies or animal welfare commitments. Social science research emphasizes the role of peer norm cascades and institutional trust in driving systemic behavior change (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Bicchieri, 2016). Alumni act as trusted messengers within these systems.

Systemic and Cultural Change (7)

As institutions reform their food procurement, investment standards, or education curricula, they contribute to a larger cultural shift. Public discourse increasingly aligns factory farming with harm, not necessity. Norms change. Systems follow. And because these shifts are driven by a distributed network of leaders embedded in diverse institutions, the change is both scalable and resilient. Over time, this groundswell of moral rejection, policy transformation, and community mobilization contributes to the systemic dismantling of factory farming.

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