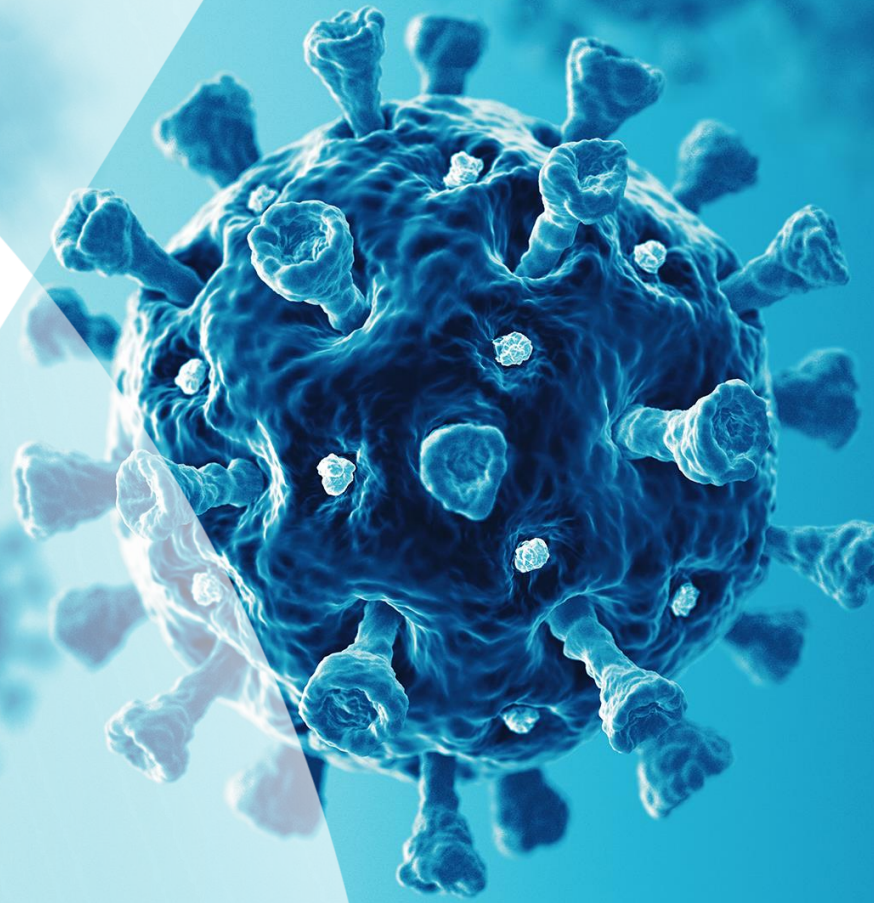


# **Building forward better: Why pandemic recovery needs to embrace transformation to achieve equality**

Dr Cynthia McDougall  
Senior Research Fellow  
Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI)

# **1. Effects of the pandemic on gender equality**



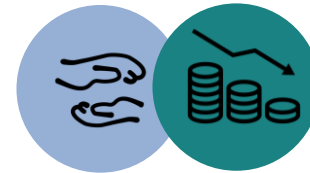
## The pandemic elucidated gender inequalities and exacerbated them, especially for women from marginalized groups



For every 3 months of lockdown, an additional 15 million additional cases of **gender-based violence** expected.

COVID-19 pandemic is likely to cause a one-third reduction in progress towards ending gender-based violence by 2030.

(UNFPA, 2020)



“Women have been hit harder than men **by job losses** around the world due to the pandemic and their employment levels are likely to **recover more slowly** as they continue to do more **unpaid care work**”.

(WEF, 9/12/2021)

....as well as unmet needs for family planning, increases in child marriages, loss of assets, debt traps and more....

# An entire extra generation has to wait for gender equality

(World Economic Forum, 2021)

*“When it comes to gender equality, we are not talking about a lost decade. We are talking about almost four”*

(UNCTAD, Oct 2021)

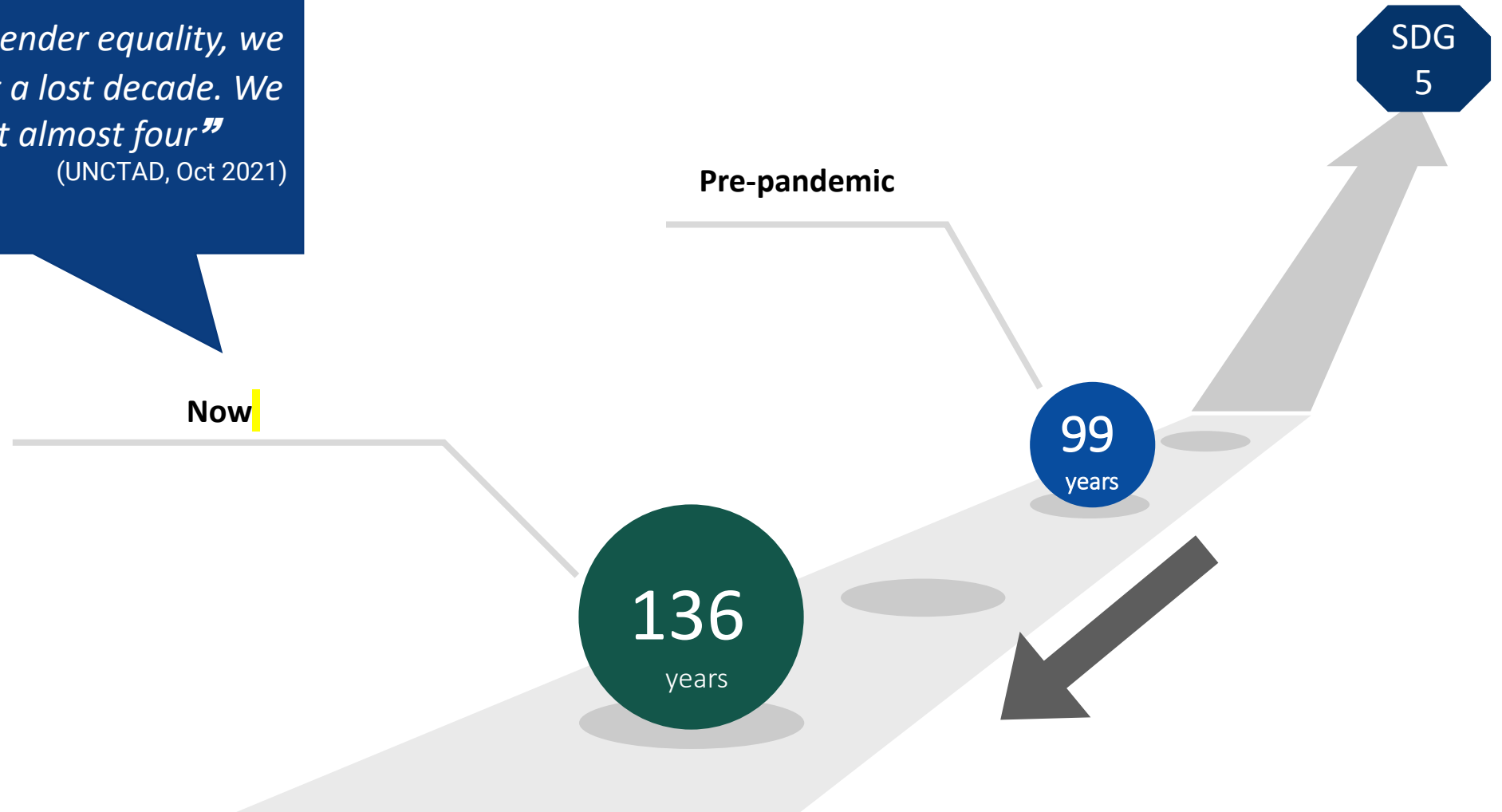
Now

Pre-pandemic

136  
years

99  
years

SDG  
5





## 2. Why?



Image credit:  
Iceberg painting 2  
by Philippe Put

# Underlying structural barriers

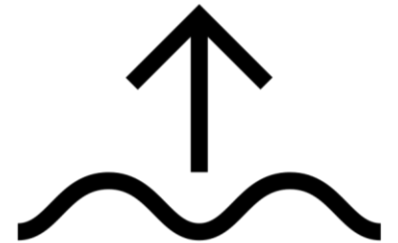


Shocks take place in the already unlevel playing fields of development

- Pandemic and measures to address it took place in socio-political, economic contexts that were **already unequal and inequitable**
- Not causing, but revealing and worsening inequalities because of the **underlying barriers** 'built into' societies, markets, and development
- Deeply embedded, **naturalized** inequitable and constraining 'rules of the game':
  - Policies (& formulation, translation)
  - Systems (e.g., statistics/data, finance, innovation)
  - Social and gender norms
- **Create and re-create inequalities...**
- 'Weak link in the development chain': In the face of shocks, underlying barriers drive societies and markets at all scales towards worsening intersectional gender inequalities

# ...Why weren't previous gender investments enough to buffer the shocks?

- In theory, development recognizes that achieving gender equality will rely on amplifying **agency**, balancing gender **relations**, and enabling **structures**
- **Yet**, to date much development has de facto **narrowed** to agency...and then further narrowed agency...
- Many gender approaches and investments tended to:
  - Address visible gender gaps, eg women's 'participation' in programs or in economic opportunities (but limited)...
  - Target women (only), heroes or vulnerable, aiming to build their capacities
- Missing out on addressing structural barriers, these represent 'empowerment lite' (Cornwall, 2018), 'tinkering' (Lawless et al. 2021) or '**above the waterline**' approaches...





‘Shallower’  
approaches

Targeting  
individuals

What **women** do (roles), capacities,  
participation *in* programs...





‘Shallower’  
approaches

Targeting  
individuals

What **women** do (roles), capacities,  
participation *in* programs...

↓  
‘Deeper’  
approaches

Transforming  
structures

How **society says** women and men  
should behave

How **society values** people of different  
genders, different identities



An iceberg floating in the ocean under a blue sky with clouds. The tip of the iceberg is above the water, and the much larger base is submerged. Yellow arrows indicate a cycle between 'Balancing relations' and 'Transforming structures' within the submerged part. Text boxes are placed around the iceberg to describe different levels of the issue.

Amplifying  
agency

What **women** chose and act on...

Balancing  
relations

Transforming  
structures

Needed for  
sustained,  
systemic  
change

How **society says** women and men  
should behave

How **society values** people of different  
genders, different identities

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

## 3. Two insights for moving ahead



# 1

Instead of building back, **build forward better**

- Opportunity to surface what was not working in 'normal':
  - 'naturalized inequalities'
  - naturalized yet constraining norms, systems and policies...
- Break 'lock in' on pre-existing but constraining structures...
- Engender resilience via transformation...





1

Instead of building back, **build forward better**

- Opportunity to surface what was not working in 'normal':
  - 'naturalized inequalities'
  - naturalized yet constraining norms, systems and policies...
- Break 'lock in' on pre-existing but constraining structures...
- Engender resilience via transformation...



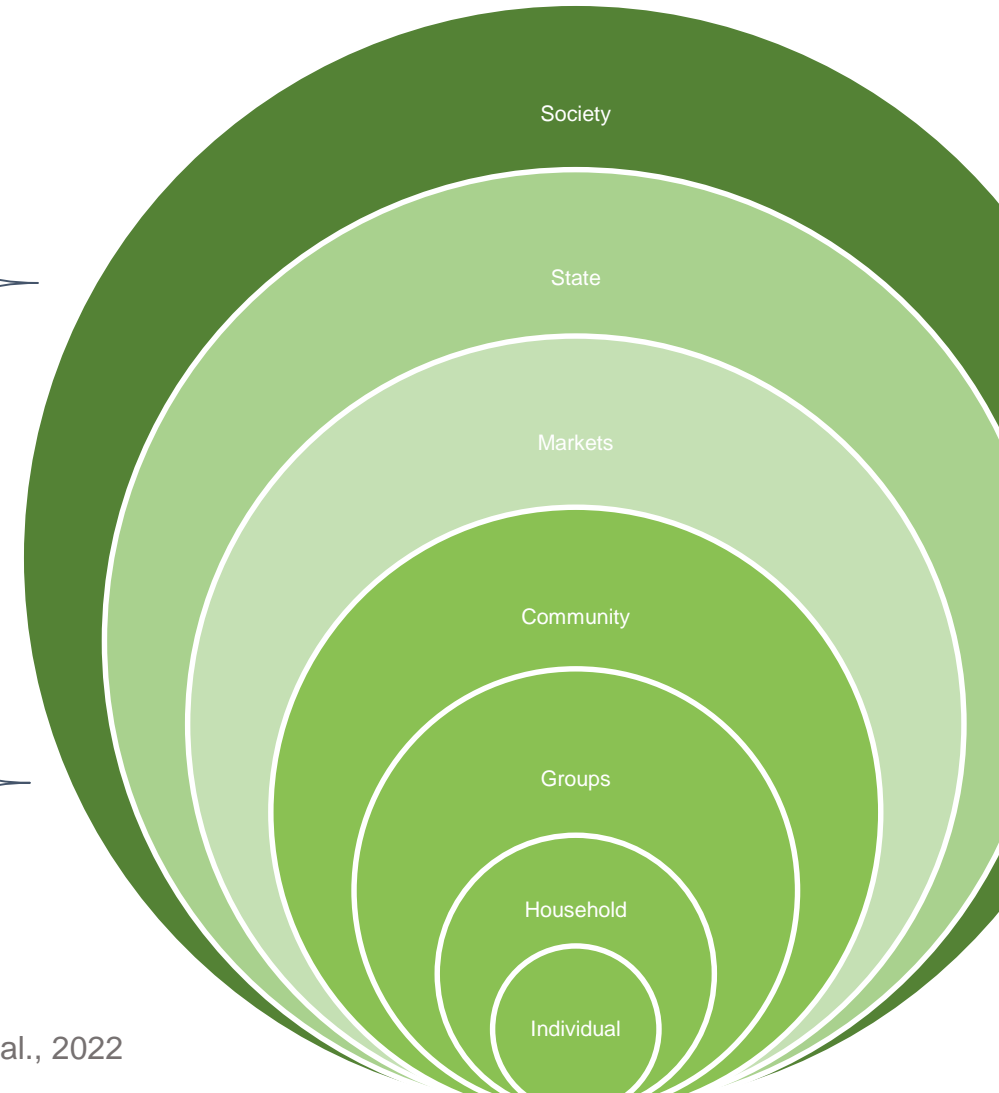
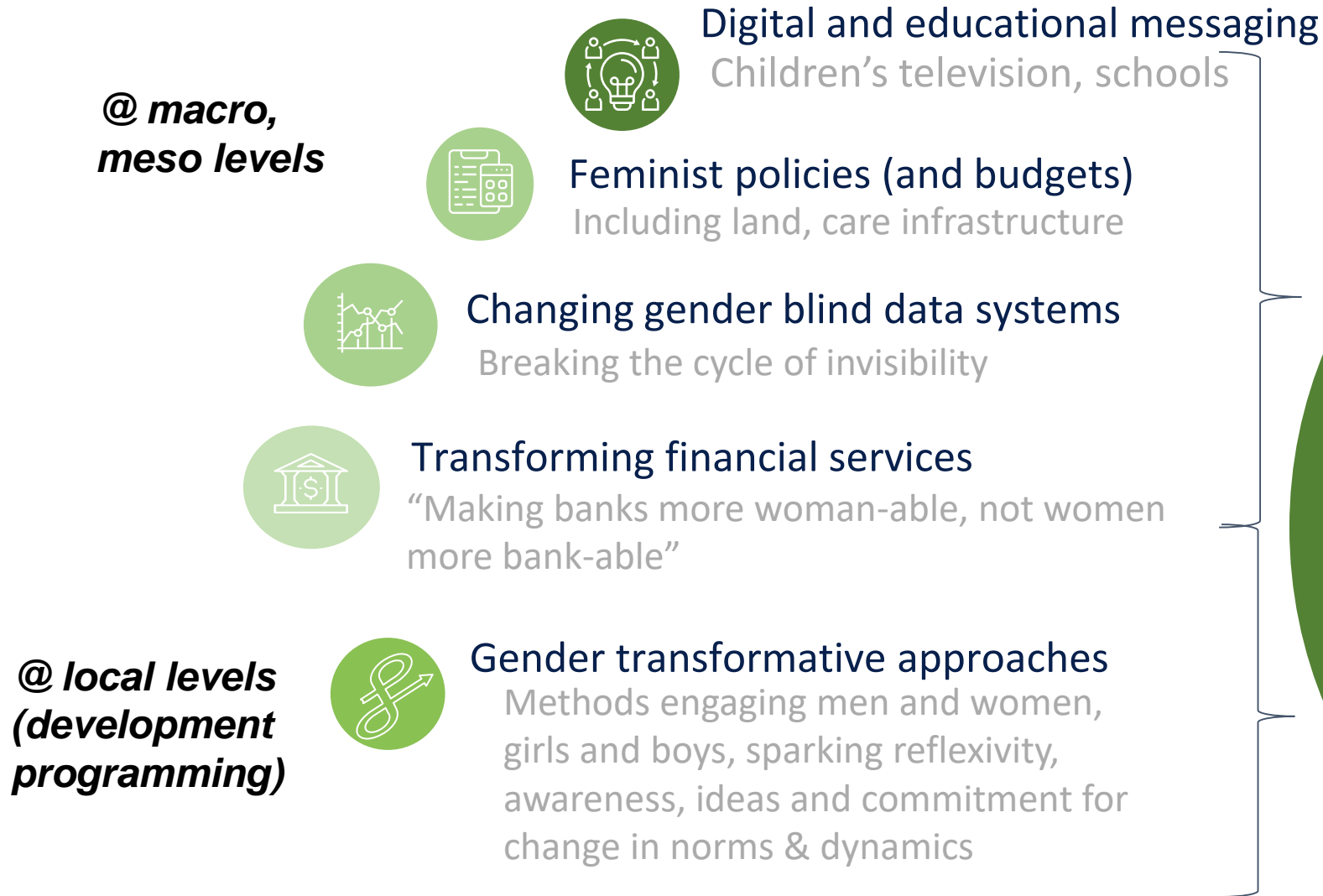
2

Assess and opt for **transforming** underlying structural barriers

- Level the playing field, change the rules of the game
- Build on emerging best practices
- At multiple scales...  
...to create a **tipping point**



# Emerging transformative strategies

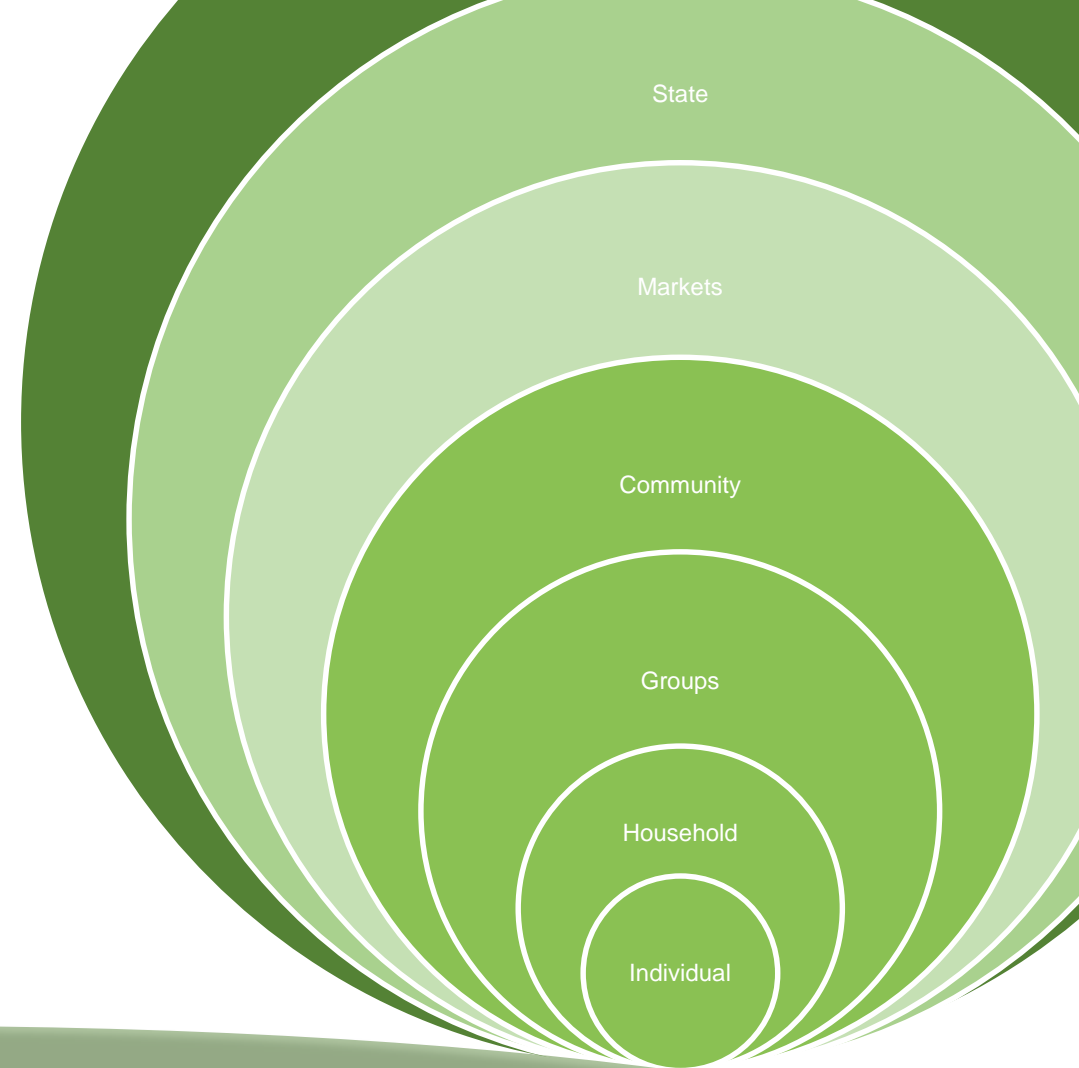


Source: McDougall et al., 2022

# Necessary foundations

“The necessary foundation for gender transformative change is that ‘those doing the research and development’ need to begin by questioning themselves and their own perceptions and biases...”

(McDougall et al. forthcoming)



**@*within* development organizations**

...more internally and externally inclusive, equitable, empowering....

# Recap: Two take aways

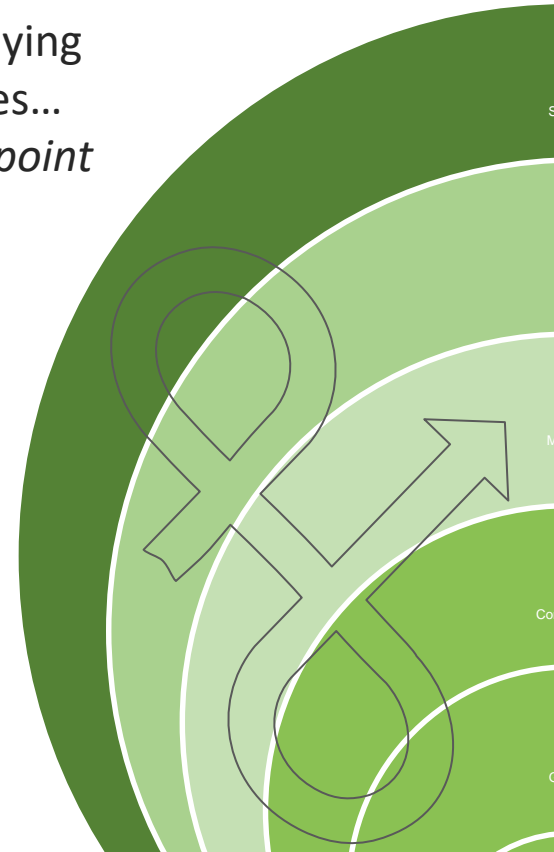
1

Instead of building *back*, ***build forward better***



2

Invest in ***transforming*** underlying structural barriers at all scales... to ultimately create a *tipping point towards equality*





**Thank you—  
and your insights are  
welcome!**

Dr Cynthia McDougall  
Senior Research Fellow,  
Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI)  
[cynthia.mcdougall@sei.org](mailto:cynthia.mcdougall@sei.org)



# References

---

Cornwall, A. (2018). Beyond “empowerment lite”: Women’s empowerment, neoliberal development and global justice. *cadernos pagu*, (52).

Lawless, S., Cohen, P. J., McDougall, C., Mangubhai, S., Song, A. M., & Morrison, T. H. (2022). Tinker, tailor or transform: Gender equality amidst social-ecological change. *Global Environmental Change*, 72, 102434.

McDougall et al. Forthcoming in 2022. *Gender transformative approaches for equality in food systems: A review of methods and strategies at multiple levels*. CGIAR GENDER Platform Working Paper. Nairobi: CGIAR.

UNCTAD. Oct 1, 2021. *COVID-19 threatens four ‘lost decades’ for gender equality*. Blogpost: <https://unctad.org/news/covid-19-threatens-four-lost-decades-gender-equality>

UNFPA with contributions from Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University (Australia). 2020. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage Pandemic threatens achievement of the Transformative Results. Interim Technical Note--Information as of 27 April 2020. [Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage | United Nations Population Fund \(unfpa.org\)](https://www.unfpa.org/publications/impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital-mutilation-and-child-marriage)

World Economic Forum in collaboration with Thomson Reuters Foundation. Dec 9, 2021. ‘One step forward, 3 steps back’: Gender equality and COVID-19. Blogpost: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/12/gender-equality-covid-19-pay-gap/>

World Economic Forum. 2021. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021—Insight Report*. Geneva: WEF. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>

Acknowledging here the icons sourced from Noun Project, with thanks to its many contributors.

