



Researched by:

**Global Knowledge Initiative**

# Systems Leadership

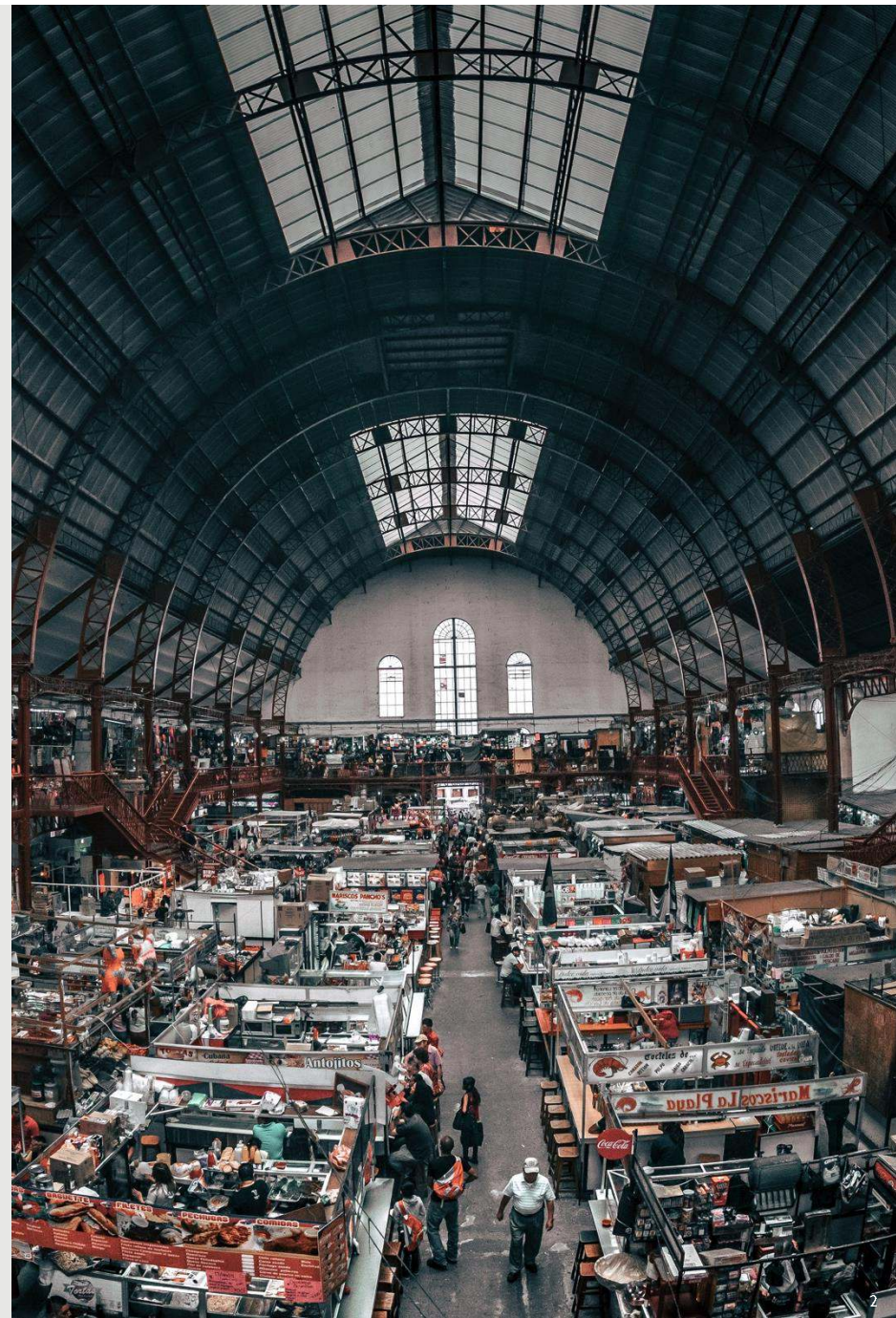
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An introduction to the concept, case studies, skills, and learning journeys that support Systems Leadership

## WHY DOES SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP MATTER?

Systems are all around us. Some of them are relatively simple, like the lock on a door, and some of them are incredibly complex, like an ecosystem made up of trees, rivers, predators, and prey – all of which interact in unique ways while also responding to external events like changing weather patterns.

Systems shape our lives in ways we might not even realize, but we can also shape them. To do so, we must understand what systems are, how they operate, and how we can change them.





# Definitions

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Defining the key terms that relate to  
Systems Leadership



# DEFINITIONS: SYSTEMS

Systems are characterized by a set of actors and interactions that form a coherent whole, perform a specific function or functions, and have a boundary that sets the system apart from the rest of the world.

Systems can be simple, complicated, chaotic, or complex. Complex systems, those often at play in international development work, exhibit emergent and unpredictable behavior, including non-linear change and tipping points.



# DEFINITIONS: SYSTEMS (continued)

But whether complex or simple, large (Tanzania) or small (an organization), all systems are comprised of **four main components**:



**Boundaries:** Parameters and limits that distinguish what's inside the system from what's outside the system (e.g., national, regional, sectoral)



**Actors:** Formal and informal elements within a system (e.g., individuals, institutions—companies, research institutions, government bodies, etc.)



**Linkages:** Simple and complex relationships and their consequences (e.g., interconnections and feedback loops)



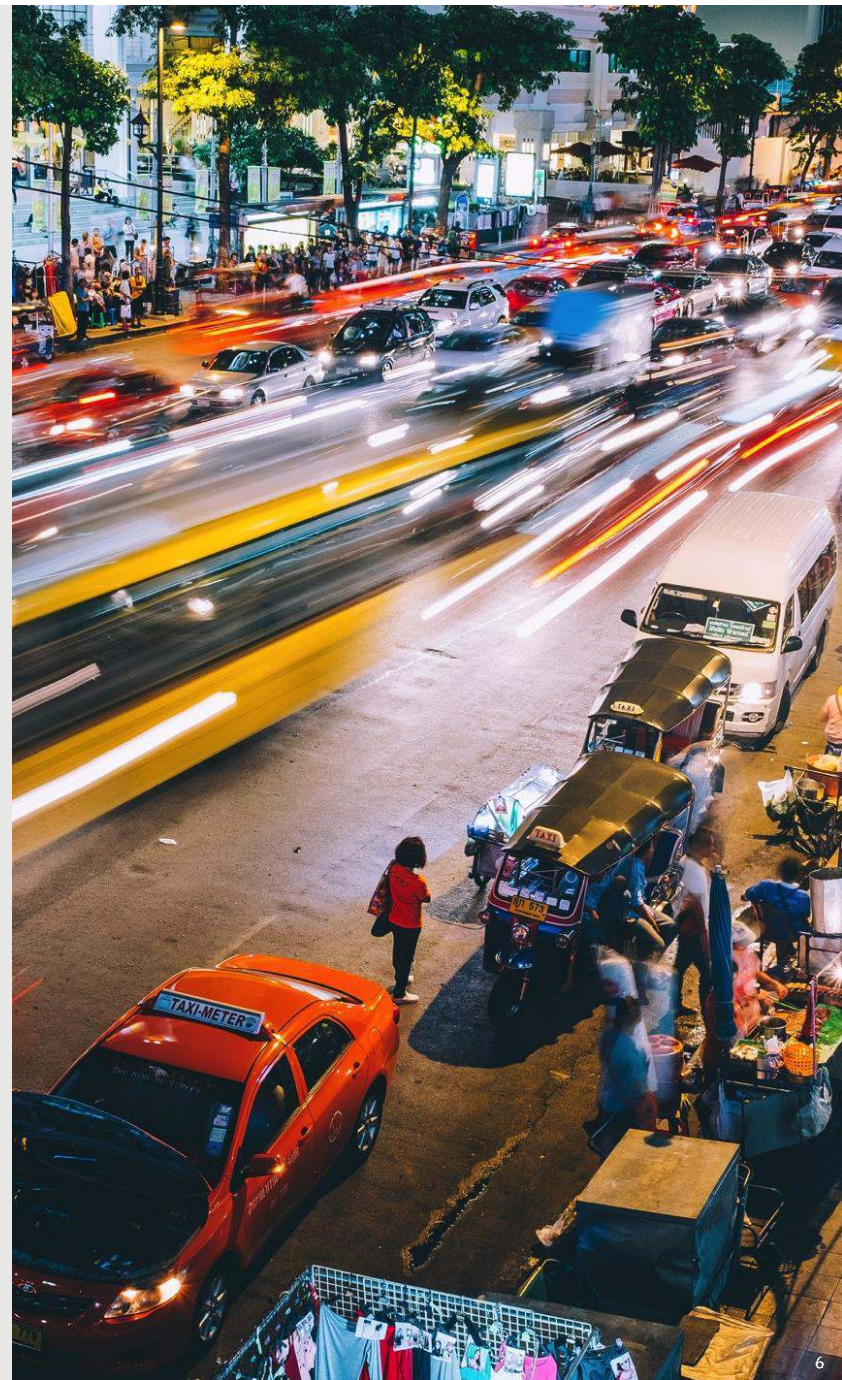
**Enabling Environment:** Interrelated conditions that impact actors within a specific boundary (e.g., infrastructure, policies, culture, history, geography, etc.)





# DEFINITIONS: SYSTEMS CHANGE

A structural change to a system that is the result of forces in the enabling environment, between actors, and/or their linkages. Systems change can occur at different scales within a system. When systems change, the shift can be **incremental**, whereby just one system component changes (e.g., new actors enter the system, establishing new relationships) or **transformational**, whereby simultaneous changes occur across multiple system components (enabling environment, linkages, and actors) sufficient to shift the underlying structures and performance of the system.



# SYSTEMS CHANGE SUPPORTING IDEAS

- Systems change **addresses the root causes**, or “the system dynamics or conditions that create a problem in the first place and entrench the problem in society. These root causes are what defy transactional or singular interventions, allowing the problem to perpetuate.”  
(Social Innovation Generation)
- Systems change is “a phenomenon where **individuals, organizations, policies, and regulations come together to create a new way of doing things** that is both feasible and sustainable.”  
(Columbia University Models for Change initiative)
- Significant, or transformational, systems change “brings about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. **These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures, and values.**” (New Philanthropy Capital)



# DEFINITION: SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

Systems Leaders are defined by their ability to **see the scale and complexity of the challenges they face**, and, in doing so, understand that they cannot control this complexity but **must embrace it**.

They seek to transform the systems in which they operate by **influencing the system at multiple levels** – including the actors within the system, the linkages between them, and the enabling environment they operate within – to **drive the emergence of new, often unpredictable patterns of organization** in the system's structure. In pursuit of this they involve as many people's ideas, talents, energies, and expertise as possible by fostering reflection and more generative conversations to **shift from reactive problem solving to co-creating solutions for the future**.





# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES FROM THE EXPERTS

What distinguishes Systems Leadership from traditional leadership:

- **Complexity:** Systems Leaders aren't intimidated to navigate the system's complexity.
- **Collective identity:** Systems Leaders aren't just lone superstars. They are "people, groups, organizations who are able to understand and see the opportunities for change within a system and orchestrate a change".
- **Experimentation:** They test new ideas by putting them into action, learning from the results, and then reacting; they follow a feedback loop of observing, orienting, deciding, and acting.
- **Inspiration:** They inspire people, teams, and entire organizations to pursue the change it will take to achieve aspirational goals; they're able to persuade people to step outside of their comfort zones, silos, and egos.
- **Learning:** Systems Leaders are continuously learning and have learning agility as a core competency.
- **Process:** They see change as a process that unfolds, not a static thing.
- **Force multiplier:** Systems Leaders understand the larger system and enable others to do the same.
- **Motivation:** Systems Leaders have the capacity and motivation to change the system.



# Leadership Styles

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Distinguishing Systems Leadership from other forms of leadership

There are many ways to think about leadership styles. One way is to consider Systems Leadership as a unique leadership style with respect to **two key variables**:

## THINKING ABOUT LEADERSHIP STYLES

### **Appetite for change – Incremental change vs. Transformational change**

Incremental change is the everyday change with which we're most familiar. Often predictable and visible within a project timeline, it occurs when things (resources, actors, influences, etc.) are added, removed, adapted within a system. Transformational change, on the other hand, is the large-scale change that happens when lots of incremental changes add up or co-evolve. At this scale, change defies prediction, particularly when it occurs within complex systems. A leader's appetite for systems change can extend from incremental change to transformational.

### **Scale of collaboration – Individualistic vs. Collaborative**

Individualistic leaders are the do-it-yourselfers. They believe they're the experts in the room, and lead in a way that reflects that. Alternatively, collaborative leaders acknowledge that, while they have valuable expertise in a given area, they can't possibly be the authority on every single issue that matters to their project. They seek to lead in a participatory way and activate the collective to realize change.

With these two variables in mind we can dissect leadership into four distinct styles: **Management, Authoritarian, Collective, and Systems**. What is important to note is that none of these styles are necessarily superior to the others. What matters is the context in which they are applied.



# LEADERSHIP STYLE MATRIX

Collaborative  
↑  
Scale of Collaboration  
↓  
Individualistic

## Collective Leadership

**Definition:** A bottom-up, democratic approach to leadership that endeavors to incorporate as many voices in the decision-making process as possible.

**Embodiment:** Connects diverse groups of people, shapes how people perceive themselves and others, moves past traditional boundaries.

**Situation/context:** Practical for tackling single issue challenges that require high-levels of momentum around a solution.

**Other considerations:** Limited capacity to address complex challenges; does not incorporate a systemic view; it can create factions of parties with competing interests, rather than allies.

**Example:** In 2011, the protestors of Occupy Wall Street assembled in New York City's financial district. To achieve their goals, protestors acted on consensus-based decisions made in general assemblies. The lack of a coherent vision ultimately thwarted the goals of the movement, which achieved no substantial policy change.

## Management Leadership

**Definition:** A more traditional style of leadership based on notions of linear cause and effect that is catalyzed by a single individual.

**Embodiment:** Expertise in a given topic area, the ability to take charge of a situation, high levels of risk-tolerance.

**Situation/context:** Effective in simple or complicated contexts, such as the day-to-day management of a project or solving problems that rely completely on past experience.

**Other considerations:** Can create dependencies between leader and the led, such as an inability for anyone else to take risks, which in turn disempowers those relying on the leader.

**Example:** Henry Ford is one of the iconic businessmen of the 20th century. Although his product transformed the way the world gets around, Henry Ford's leadership was top-down proving that he was able to get much accomplished through traditional hierarchical leadership practices.

## Systems Leadership

**Definition:** A collaborative approach to leadership that endeavors to solve complex challenges by strategically activating the actors and components of a system to drive the emergence of new patterns and performance at multiple systems levels.

**Embodiment:** A systems-wide view of change, continuous learning, an ability to strategically orchestrate change at multiple system levels.

**Situation/context:** Effective when addressing complex, multi-faceted challenges that cannot be solved using traditional approaches.

**Other considerations:** Systems leadership requires buy-in from a diverse range of actors, and delivers benefits when stakeholder are engaged in the process of envisioning change.

**Example:** Gandhi inspired a movement for Indian independence from British colonial rule. His tactics included a combination of non-violent social protests and economic protests as ways for the Indian people to fight against their colonial rulers.

## Authoritarian Leadership

**Definition:** A top-down leadership approach that seeks to exert full control over a system and the outcomes it produces.

**Embodiment:** Extremely high levels of confidence in one's own decision-making and expertise, a clear chain of command for the implementation of the leader's directives through a system.

**Situation/context:** Useful in situations where resources are scarce, team skills are low, or levels of risk are high, all of which decrease the margin for error.

**Other considerations:** Lack of autonomy can create resentment among team members, who may feel distrusted or undervalued.

**Example:** Hugo Chavez was a revolutionary who transformed Venezuelan politics. He consolidated support through a populist message built around his personality that resonated with the poorer Venezuelan base. The vacuum of power left in the wake of his death points to how systemic his influence was.

Incremental

Appetite for Change

Transformational



# Matching Leadership Style to System Type

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In what scenario is Systems Leadership warranted?

# IN WHAT TYPE OF SYSTEMS DO YOU OPERATE?

## Cynefin framework

**Cynefin**, pronounced ku-nev-in, is a Welsh word that signifies the multiple factors in our environment and our experience that together influence us in ways we cannot understand.

The Cynefin Framework breaks real-world situations into 5 types - **Simple**, **Complicated**, **Complex**, **Chaotic**, and **Disorder** - to help leaders understand the kind of system within which they operate. Understanding the system around you helps you to better analyze challenges and opportunities, and make better decisions in response .

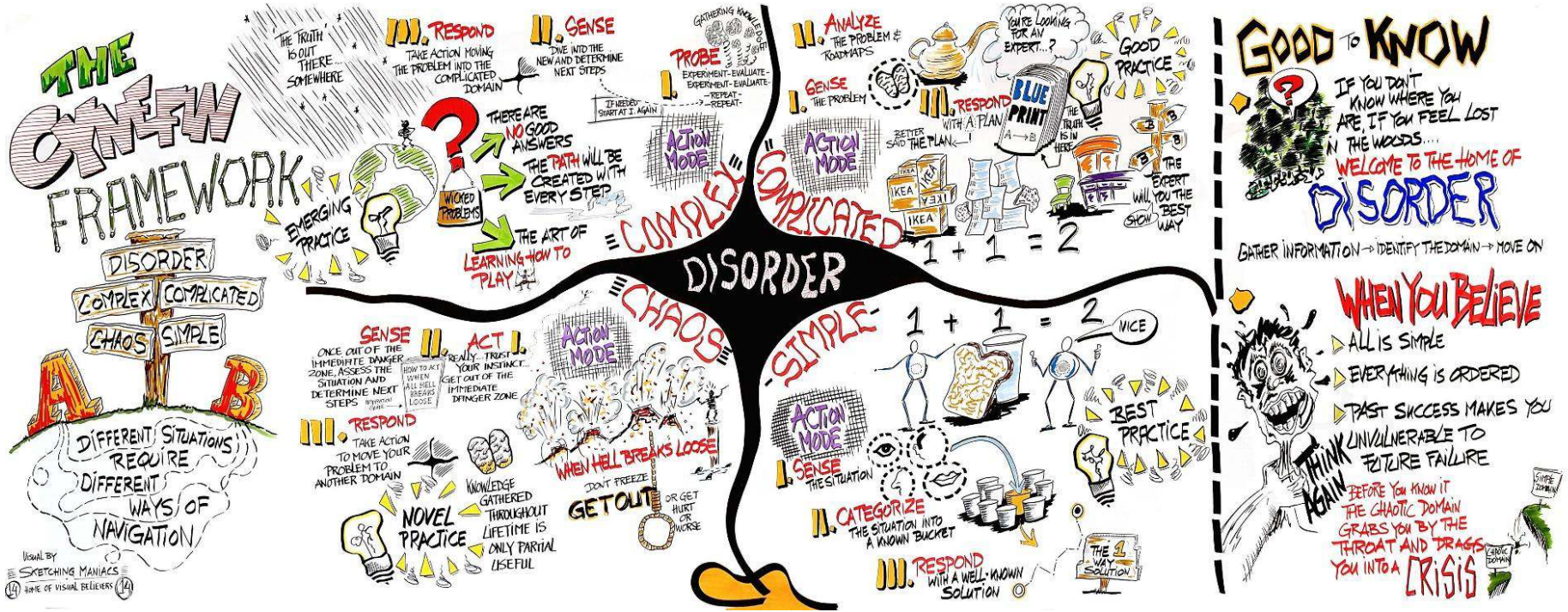
Simple	Complicated	Complex	Chaotic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>A car key is simple</i></li><li>• Easily knowable, or “known knowns”</li><li>• Characterized by stability and clear cause-and-effect relationships</li><li>• The right answer is self-evident and undisputed</li><li>• Leaders in simple systems: assess the facts, categorize them, and respond based on established practice</li><li>• Leadership challenge: oversimplification, entrenched thinking (being blind to new ways of doing things), and complacency</li><li>• International Development example: USAID grant allocation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>A car is complicated</i></li><li>• Not simple, but still knowable, or “known unknowns”</li><li>• Characterized by multiple right answers and relationships between cause and effect that may not be clear to everyone</li><li>• Leaders in complicated systems: assess the facts, analyze them, and respond based on expertise and good practice rather than defined “best practice”</li><li>• Leadership challenges: entrenched thinking and analysis paralysis</li><li>• International Development example: USAID annual budget allocation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Traffic is complex</i></li><li>• Not fully knowable but can be analyzed to make informed decisions even given “unknown unknowns”</li><li>• Characterized by turbulence and constant flux</li><li>• Multiple roadblocks</li><li>• Solutions emerge over time through experimentation</li><li>• Leaders in complex systems: probe for patterns, assess what’s desirable, then respond through experimentation</li><li>• Leadership challenges: falling back into traditional command-and-control management and tolerance of failure</li><li>• International Development example: Managing a 5-year initiative to increase food security in Indonesia</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Traffic during a blizzard is chaotic</i></li><li>• Neither knowable nor predictable</li><li>• Characterized by turbulence and indeterminable cause and effect relationships</li><li>• Leaders in chaotic systems: act to establish order, sense where stability is present or absent, then respond by working to transform the situation from chaos to complexity</li><li>• Leadership challenges: switching style when the context shifts from chaotic to complex, overinflated self-image, and managing chaos and innovation in parallel</li><li>• International Development example: Managing disaster</li></ul>

## Disorder

Unclear which of the other four contexts is predominant



# THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK

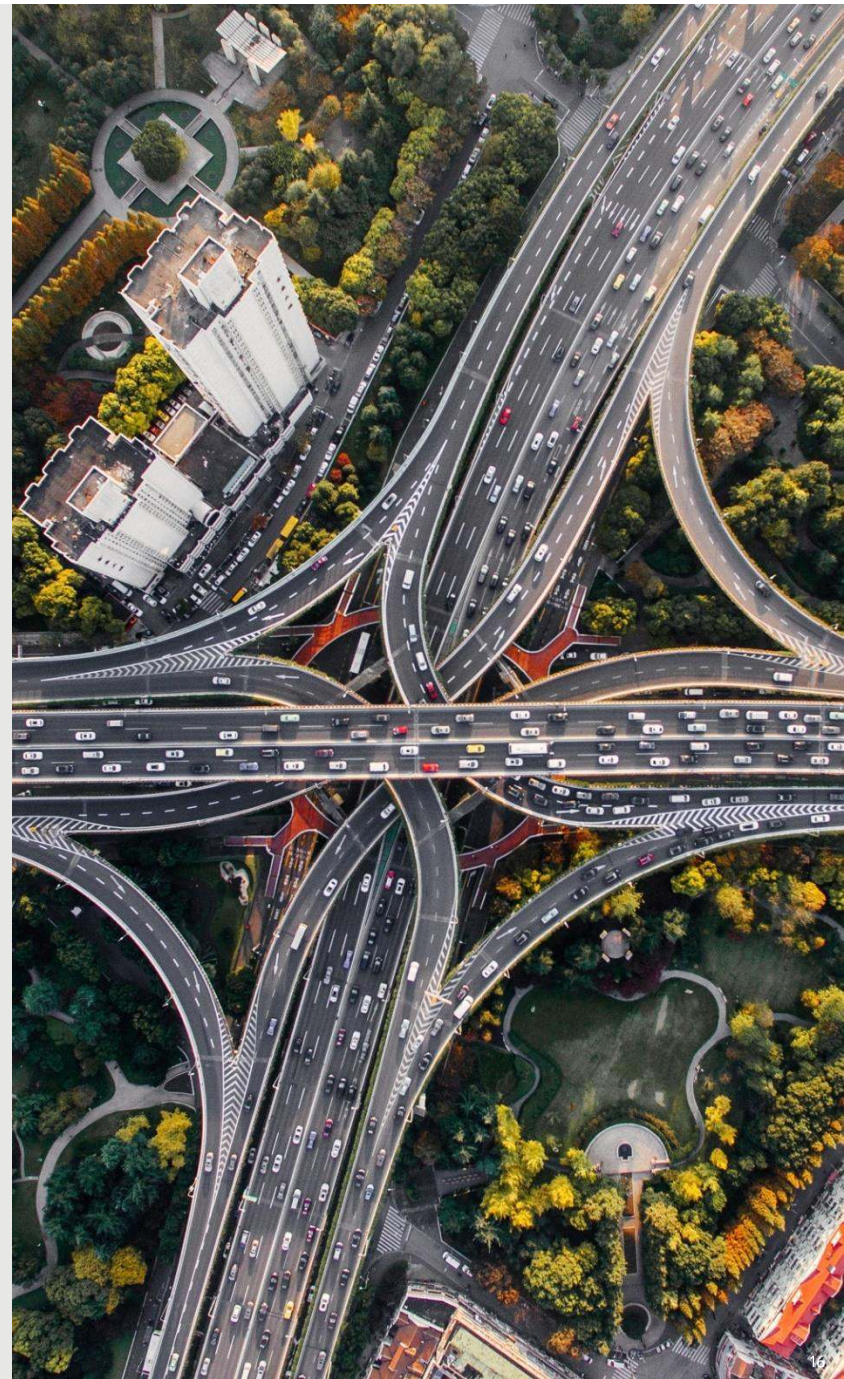


Source: Edwin Stoop via Wikipedia



*“A deep understanding of context, the ability to embrace complexity and paradox, and a willingness to flexibly change leadership style will be required for leaders who want to make things happen in a time of increasing uncertainty.”*

*- “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making”,  
Harvard Business Review, 2007*



# WHAT MAKES A COMPLEX SYSTEM CHALLENGING TO WORK IN?

International development projects often operate in the land of the *complex*. Leaders face systems rife with blindspots, intricately intertwined and interdependent relationships, and unpredictable actions and reactions. A skilled Systems Leader is adept at understanding and acting within this world of complexity. **Common roadblocks in a complex system that System Leaders encounter include:**

## Top 5 roadblocks in a complex system

## How a Systems Leader will respond

1

Pervasive siloes within and across organizations and sectors

Foster opportunities for cross-sectoral, cross-functional interaction across traditional boundaries, siloes, and hierarchies.

Create communication channels that allow for multiple interfacing options, including face-to-face, which should occur often.

2

Competing goals and ownership of resources among actors in the system

Learn how different actors fit into the system and where there is consensus, competition, and opposition.

Establish a system-level goal that accounts for competing interests and identifies ways in which competing goals can contribute to positive outcomes.

3

Exclusion or underrepresentation of the system's full diversity of fields, sectors, cultures, or social positions

Seek out diverse perspectives and ideas when designing or implementing any systems change activity.

Build networks that mirror the diversity in the system and succeed in building a high degree of trust between actors.

4

Conflicting processes and entrenched conventions that stifle innovation

Design support and reward systems that encourage innovation and experimentation; promote a risk-tolerant learning culture rather than "results at all costs".

Establish balance between the rules and processes that create order and efficiency, and an "entrepreneurial system" that promotes adaptation and innovation.

5

Turbulence and constant flux

Spark a sense of urgency among system actors during moments of crisis or in the face of looming threats.

Identify new structures or processes that embrace the momentum generated by turbulence/flux and disrupt the status quo.



*“Difficult as they are to navigate, complex systems are particularly apt spaces for Systems Leadership. Systems Leadership offers those who lead within complex systems greater resilience and boosts the likelihood of success when problem solving.”*

Even if these five roadblocks aren't present in your system, System Leaders can still play a role to enable transformational system change: he or she can **spark collaboration, create shared buy-in, engage diverse actors, foster a spirit of innovation, and leverage moments of uncertainty and turbulence to incite new opportunities!**

*A note of caution:* "Complex Systems continually evolve on their own whether or not anyone, internal or external to the system, attempts to influence them. As the late John Holland, pioneering complexity scientist from the University of Michigan, once said, "Complex systems do pretty much as they damn please!" It is next to impossible to trace a particular overall Complex System behavior to its constituent parts in identifying which system components and/or their interactions and those with the external environment are responsible for any (holistic) behavior. Indeed, this is part of what makes **Complex Systems especially interesting, challenging, and often frustrating.**" (White 2016)

**So how do you lead in the land of the complex?**



# Activating Systems Leadership in Your Work

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Tools and approaches to help activate systems change

# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP ACTIVATION FRAMEWORK

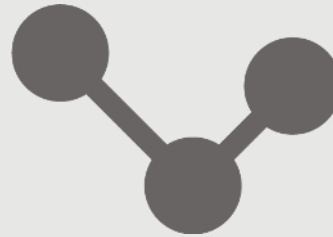
As we've learned, Systems Leadership isn't a static state for an individual, but a collective tide that stimulates multiple actors and components across the system.

However, one person or institution *can* influence the strength, direction, and speed of this tide by engaging at the 3 systems levels:



## Actors

The individuals and institutions that interact within a system or are directly affected by it



## Linkages

The connections and feedback loops in a system that allow or thwart interactions between people, institutions, ideas, and other forces



## Enabling Environment

The political, cultural, economic, social, geographic, and other dimensions in a system that bear on its performance but defy control by any one person

To activate systems change through Systems Leadership, individuals and organizations need to empower the appropriate actors, enable stronger linkages between actors, and foster a conducive enabling environment.





## System Components: Actors

The individuals and institutions that interact within a system or are directly affected by it

To activate change through a system's **Actors**, a Systems Leader can experiment with applying these

### Sample Tools & Approaches:

#### Foster Collaborative Learning

Engage all actors in an effort to understand the system

- **Learning Journey** A group field trip to experience different actors in and parts of the system that provides an opportunity for a group to learn together. **Example:** Sustainable Food Lab's [East African agricultural system learning journeys](#).
- **Actor Mapping** A visual depiction of the key individuals and institutions in a system, collectively created by those individuals and institutions. **Example:** FSG's [Guide to Actor Mapping](#).
- **Challenge Mapping** A visual tool to break down complex challenges into broad and narrow components in order to identify actionable opportunities. **Example:** GKI's [Challenge Mapping tool](#).

#### Spark Innovation

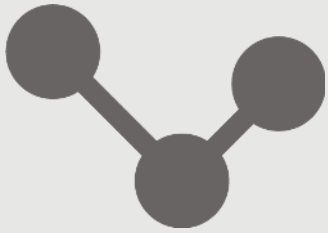
Inspire others in the system to design, test, and implement new solutions to their challenges

- **Innovation Mapping** A method for diverse stakeholders to systematically break down the points in the system that could benefit from innovation, adapted from the "job mapping" business tool.
- **Innovation Decision Making** A training methodology to improve decision makers' mindsets and equip them with processes for generating insights, reframing challenges, developing and testing new ideas, and determining a course of action to unleash innovation. **Example:** GKI's [Improved Innovation Decision Making toolset](#).

#### Encourage Empathy

Better understand and engage actors with different roles, motivations, and challenges

- **Peer Shadowing** Accompanying another actor to observe his or her work and cultivate understanding of actors outside of your typical group. **Example:** Presencing Institute's [Shadowing tool](#).
- **Dialogue Interview** A tool for understanding another actor's current challenges, questions, and expectations in advance of collaborative work. **Example:** Presencing Institute's [Dialogue Interview tool](#).
- **Peacekeeping Circle** A collective experience that brings actors into a circle to discuss their common needs while creating a space for solving conflict in a productive way. **Example:** Boston-based Roca uses [Peacekeeping Circles to break the cycle of youth incarceration](#).



# System Components: Linkages

The connections and feedback loops in a system that allow or thwart interactions between people, institutions, ideas, and other forces

To activate change through a system's **Linkages**, a Systems Leader can experiment with applying these **Sample Tools & Approaches**:

## Understand Complex Relationships

Make it easier for diverse actors to find new partners and collaborators within the system

- **Social Network Analysis** A process for investigating, mapping, and measuring social structures, including the type and direction of information flows across a network. Example: Root Change's [Network Strengthening tool](#).
- **Influence & Incentives Matrix** A simple tool for visualizing the varying abilities of systems actors to influence change and their incentive to do so. Example: Influence & Incentives Matrix in GKI's [Improved Innovation Decision Making \(IIDM\)](#) toolset.
- **Causal Loop Diagram** A visual model that explains the behaviors of a system by showing the causes and effects of actions within a system. Example: Systems & Us' [Causal Loop Diagram](#).
- **Shared Language** The use of a common terminology to promote a shared understanding of the challenges within the system and the solutions being developed to address them.

## Foster Collaborative Design

Create safe environments for actors to experiment with new approaches that engage other systems stakeholders.

- **Hackathon** An event that takes place over a finite amount of time (usually no more than a couple days) and forms teams to design solutions, or 'hack', around a specific challenge.
- **Innovation Hub** A physical cluster of diverse actors that form a microcosm for collaborative innovation and problem-solving. Example: MIT's [Regional Entrepreneurship Accelerator Program \(REAP\)](#).
- **Community of Practice** A group of like-minded individuals, usually with similar professional interests but diverse skillsets, to gather around a particular issues area for sustained, long-term engagement.
- **World Café** A [structured conversational process](#) for knowledge sharing in which groups rotate through multiple discussions about interrelated topics.

## Develop Systems Facilitators

Create problem-solving networks that spark the movement of information across the system.

- **Facilitation Training** A training program that focuses on key skills needed to facilitate productive, impartial, and collaborative discussions to reach consensus and find collaborative solutions to joint challenges.
- **Shared Leadership** A method of appointing multiple leaders from diverse background to co-lead collaborative problem-solving efforts.



# System Components: Enabling Environment

The political, cultural, economic, social, geographic, and other dimensions in a system that bear on its performance but defy control by any one person

To activate change through a system's **Enabling Environment**, a Systems Leader can experiment with applying these **Sample Tools & Approaches**:

## Guide Systems Thinking

Identify the political, social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that exert influence on the system.

- **Systemigram** A visual representation of a system's architecture: its boundaries, phenomena or elements, actors, and critical relationships that, when viewed together, help to clarify the dynamics of the system and the root causes of complex challenges. **Example:** A [Systemigram tool](#) used by the USAID SPACES MERL activity.
- **PESTLE Analysis** A [collaborative tool](#) for identifying the Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental factors that enable or block systems change.

## Analyze Change

Understand how the system shifts over time in ways that may impede or advance the change sought by Systems Leaders.

- **Three Horizons** An interactive method used to evaluate the current state of the challenge (first horizon), the ideal future (third horizon), and the possible bridges, or innovation pathways, between the two (second horizon). **Example:** International Futures Forum's [Three Horizons tool](#).
- **Trend Mapping** A visual depiction of trends that are supporting or impeding progress in a system. **Example:** FSG's [Trend Mapping tool](#).
- **OODA Loop** A [four-step process](#)—Observe, Orient, Decide, Act—for making decisions based on perpetually changing information in the system.

## Encourage Preparedness

Develop plans that are comprehensive, consistent, simple to follow, and encourage action by Systems Leaders and broader systems stakeholders.

- **Strategy Guide** A tool that invites teams to think critically about the incentives, risks, partnerships, and resources that need to be mitigated or encouraged to make a proposed solution a reality.
- **Scenario Analysis** A method of constructing alternative scenarios for how actions and reactions may shift a system in otherwise unanticipated ways. **Example:** The World Economic Forum's [Scenario Analysis on the future of global food systems](#)





# Case Studies

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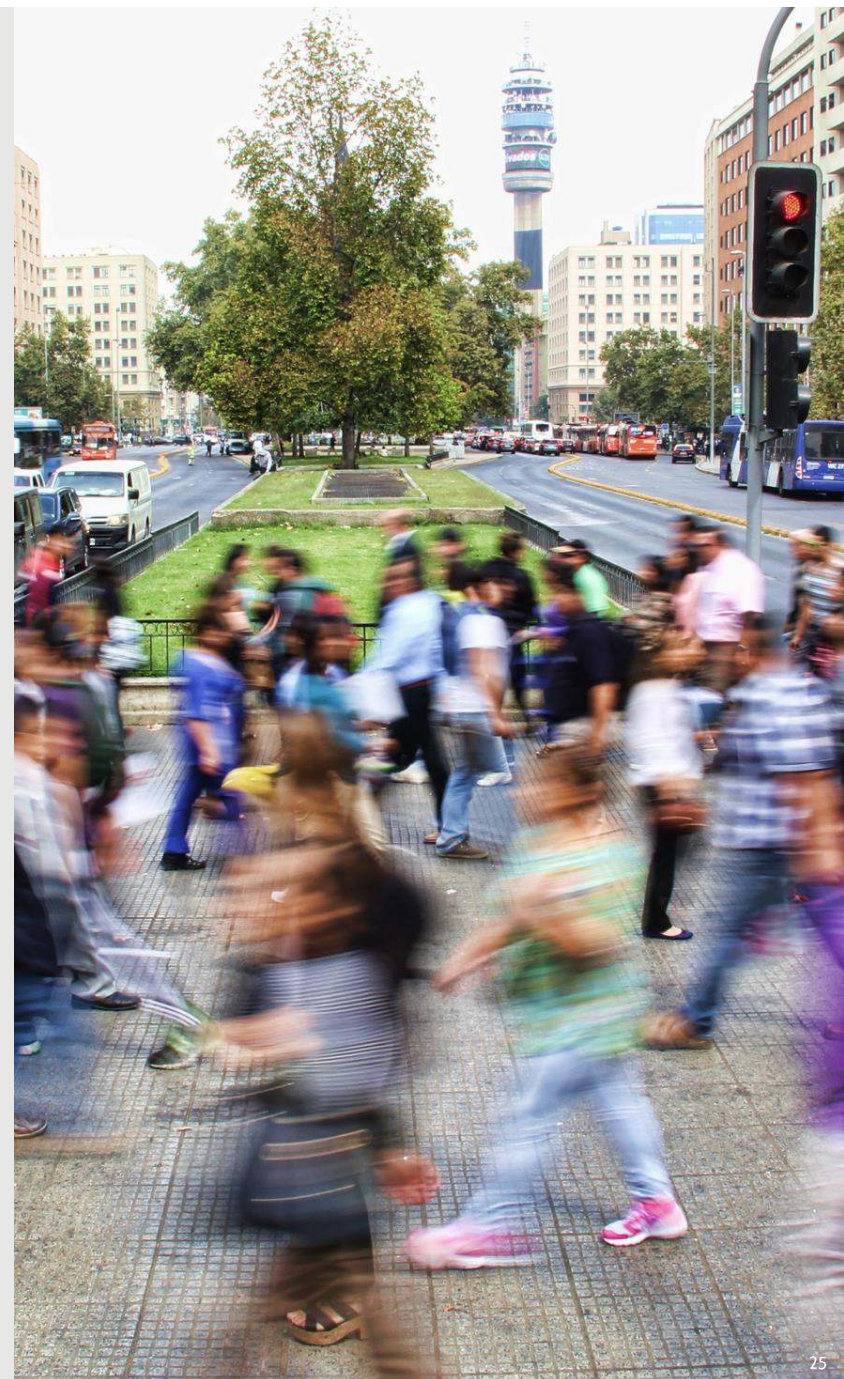
Examples of Systems Leadership in practice

# Systems Leadership CASE STUDIES

Three case studies that follow illustrate the concept of Systems Leadership: one at the level of an **individual in a community**, one **development project**, and one **private sector** example. The cases demonstrate the diverse array of situations and contexts where Systems Leadership can be applied, as well as the forms a systems leader can take.

When reading through these studies you will find examples of what each of these leaders has done, or is doing, at the level of **actors**, **linkages**, and the **enabling environment**. In this section, a (+) symbol indicates those actions that were successful moves on the part of the systems leader. A (-) symbol indicates areas where they faced challenges or could improve.

These case studies illustrate real world examples of Systems Leadership. They do not encompass the full range of potential identities, options, and activities available to Systems Leaders. Further, the selected cases illustrate a System Leader who pursued an objective for positive change. It should be noted that negative examples of Systems Leadership exist as well, but were eschewed because they do not align with the objectives underpinning international development.



# TONY RINAUDO – FARMER MANAGED NATURAL REGENERATION

## Background

Tony Rinaudo is the one of the original champions of Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) in the Sahel, which has helped to reduce and even reverse land degradation. FMNR practices reduce desertification, aid in climate change adaptation, and improve food security. Despite the multitude of benefits, FMNR initially received pushback from local farmers because it was unlike their traditional practices. Thus, it required programmatic actions over the course of two decades to spark wide scale positive environmental transformation.

The premise of FMNR was borne in the mind of Tony Rinaudo, an Australian sustainable agriculture expert.

Looking at a patch of shrubs in the Sahel, he realized that they weren't shrubs at all, but were trees trying to regrow. Because of the farmers' grazing and farming practices the trees were unable to find the room to grow. This epiphany helped Rinaudo rethink his approach. Rather than plant trees, farmers could employ traditional techniques like coppicing, the practice of pruning trees strategically to aid regrowth, and achieve better results. But getting his idea to take off was not easy. Farmers were unable to see the immediate benefits of adopting FMNR, so convincing them to embrace it required strategic action by Rinaudo, such as by engaging key systems actors with linkages to others in the system. Today, FMNR has helped to regenerate 5 million hectares of land in Niger alone and is spreading to several other countries.



## Actors

(+) Rather than try to work with every actor in the system, Rinaudo worked with strategic local leaders to demonstrate the value of, and develop the capacity for, FMNR practices.

(-) Initially Rinaudo did not have buy-in for FMNR because the value of the approach was not readily apparent. During a drought, he provided staple foods to farmers who adopted FMNR in hopes that they would continue after it ended, but many did not.

**Lesson:** A Systems Leader needs buy-in from a diverse range of actors throughout the system. A Systems Leader has to find creative ways to demonstrate the value of their change efforts and bring more people into the fold.



## Linkages

(+) Rinaudo leveraged the influence of local leaders, who created informal clusters, which could then be used strategically to disseminate FMNR practices more throughout the system in a peer to peer manner.

(+) Rinaudo embedded himself within the Sahel region for 20+ years. This helped establish trust between himself and different actors in the system.

**Lesson:** An effective approach to Systems Leadership can be the “leader of leaders” approach, which helps leverage the existing linkages of influential actors.



## Enabling Environment

(-) While Rinaudo argued for land tenure reform in Niger, this was not ultimately achieved, largely due to his focus on the activities of individual farmers.

(+) Recognizing the benefits of leveraging multi-lateral partners that convene actors across multiple systems, Rinaudo pursued a partnership with the World Bank Clean Development Mechanism to establish a Carbon Credit program in Ethiopia. This allows communities to earn and sell carbon credits for each ton of carbon dioxide absorbed by reforested trees. The Ethiopian Government has now committed to reforesting 15 million hectares of land using FMNR by 2035.

**Lesson:** Often times it is not enough to advocate for change at the enabling environment level, it requires identifying opportunities and building strategic partnerships and linkages.



# USAID – CIVIL SOCIETY INNOVATION INITIATIVE

## Background

USAID has long prioritized the development of the civil society sector in partner countries due to its belief that a vibrant civil society is necessary for a democratic political culture. The Civil Society Innovation Initiative (CSII) is a USAID/SIDA joint project that seeks to support, strengthen, and connect civil society actors through the development of a new system of regional networks, which are facilitated by a regional hub.

The regional hubs are in effect the implementers of CSII: hubs have been co-designed with local actors through a facilitated process to build a guiding vision for how the civil society sector could be transformed in that region. Now in implementation, CSII uses a model of south-south learning, where the regional hubs support knowledge transfer within and between regions.

Thus far, this engagement has led to several qualified successes: the project has brought together a diverse range of actors, supported them with capacity building, and fostered new partnerships.

However, if CSII is to achieve systems change in the civil society sector, as it endeavors to do, there are also areas where it will need to improve its approach. In particular, more will need to be done at the level of the enabling environment within every country in each region, where the members of the regional hubs actually operate day-to-day. In addition, if the project can build stronger linkages between actors it will help to foster the further collaboration needed to achieve systems change.

### Actors

(+) CSII has experimented with different levels of involvement from innovators, local civil society actors, and network facilitators to discover which combination of actors best drives change. In the East Asian hub they have focused on adjusting the hiring process to attract talent that can support systems change.

(+) CSII has supported local actors with capacity building for critical systems change activities, such as adaptive management approaches, which can support organizations via continuous learning and iteration.

**Lesson:** The development of a team, and the mix of abilities and capacities they embody, is vital to the success of change efforts.

### Linkages

(+) At first, participants did not understand their relationship to others in the system. CSII has helped them to understand their similarities and opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange. In Africa, for instance, they planned to develop regional hubs at the level of East, West, South, and Central Africa. Once they realized they all faced similar challenges, they decided to instead aggregate into a single African hub.

(-) CSII has helped build strong linkages between actors and their hubs, but not as strong linkages between individual actors within and between each country involved in the hub.

**Lesson:** Systems Leaders need to build relationships, but also ensure that actors are building relationships with each other.

### Enabling Environment

(+) CSII hubs are conducting research on what elements of the enabling environment most inhibit civil society progress at the regional level, which will inform future project programming.

(-) With so much focus at the regional level, CSII does not give enough attention to the aspects of the enabling environment that need to change at the national level. An example can be found in Africa, where many civil society actors can potentially face imprisonment as a result of speaking out. Yet, the project is doing very little at the legal/policy level to ensure greater freedom of speech.

**Lesson:** While CSII has benefited from the co-creation process, this has perhaps created too much of a focus on generating ideas and reaching consensus, and less on the execution of activities. One component of Systems Leadership is to not get trapped in “analysis paralysis” but to go out and get your hands dirty.

# VERGHESE KURIEN – OPERATION FLOOD AND THE WHITE REVOLUTION

## Background

Operation Flood was an agricultural dairy development program that transformed India from a milk-deficient country to the world's largest milk producer. Verghese Kurien was the man behind the movement. Through his plan, the “White Revolution” transformed India's dairy industry from a pittance into the largest in the world, with dairy farming accounting for one-third of rural incomes.

The idea for Operation Flood was borne out of Kurien's work at the Amul dairy cooperative in Gujarat state. While he was there, he helped build an in-house processing plant and began to organize the cooperative to market its product directly to consumers.

This cooperative, benefit-sharing model attracted farmers from all over the region to participate; helped transform milk producer relationships from competitors to collaborators; and grew Amul into the nation's largest dairy producer. Seeing the effect his actions could have on people inspired Kurien to scale this work and change India's entire dairy production and sale system to put farmers at the center.

This plan was called Operation Flood, and it took place at all levels of India's dairy system. It gave farmers' ownership of their product, worked to improve their linkages to large urban markets, and changed the composition of the enabling environment by creating new institutions and transforming the infrastructure the industry relied on. But not all of Kurien's strategies were as successful as others, in particular his personality as a traditional, vocal leader, and the structure of some of his original programs deterred from his success.

## Actors

(+) At the core of Kurien's work at Amul and through Operation Flood was putting the farmer first. Both projects helped farmers own and operate their own milk production, processing, and marketing, putting systems change into their hands.

(-) At first Kurien's strategies were not very inclusive, as Amul's operating area was dominated by one caste and discouraged other castes from participating. Surveys also indicated that women were marginalized participants in the dairy cooperatives. This inhibited the potential for collaborative learning.

Lesson: Systems Leadership can be arduous work, sometimes carried out over a lifetime. Thus, a Systems Leader needs to have a personal stake in the challenge they are trying to solve. For Kurien, the motivation wasn't the milk, but the farmers behind the milk.

## Linkages

(+) One of the underpinnings of Operation Flood was the creation of a national dairy grid to link producers and consumers directly.

(+) Village-level cooperatives were the other major driver behind the success of Operation Flood, which transformed the relationships of dairy producers from competitors to collaborators.

Lesson: Creating new linkages, or repairing broken ones, requires looking at the relationships of the system in new ways.

## Enabling Environment

(+) Kurien used his influence to advocate for new institutions to govern dairy production, including the National Dairy Development Board.

(+) Kurien advocated for the paving of “milk roads” to facilitate the movement of goods from cooperatives in rural areas to cities.

(-) The combination of Kurien's influence and bombastic style rubbed many people the wrong way, and he often came under attack from various members of government and industry.

Lesson: Personality is important: the same qualities that might help a leader attract a following can also inhibit change if a leader rubs other influencers in the system the wrong way.



# Systems Leadership Capacity Development

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The 9 core skills of a successful Systems Leaders and pathways to build them

# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

A core set of skills and attitudes define an effective Systems Leader. Cultivating the 10 attitudes and developing the 9 skills that follow will position development practitioners well in their pursuit of Systems Leadership.



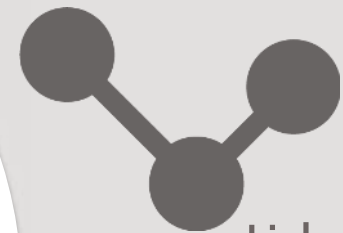
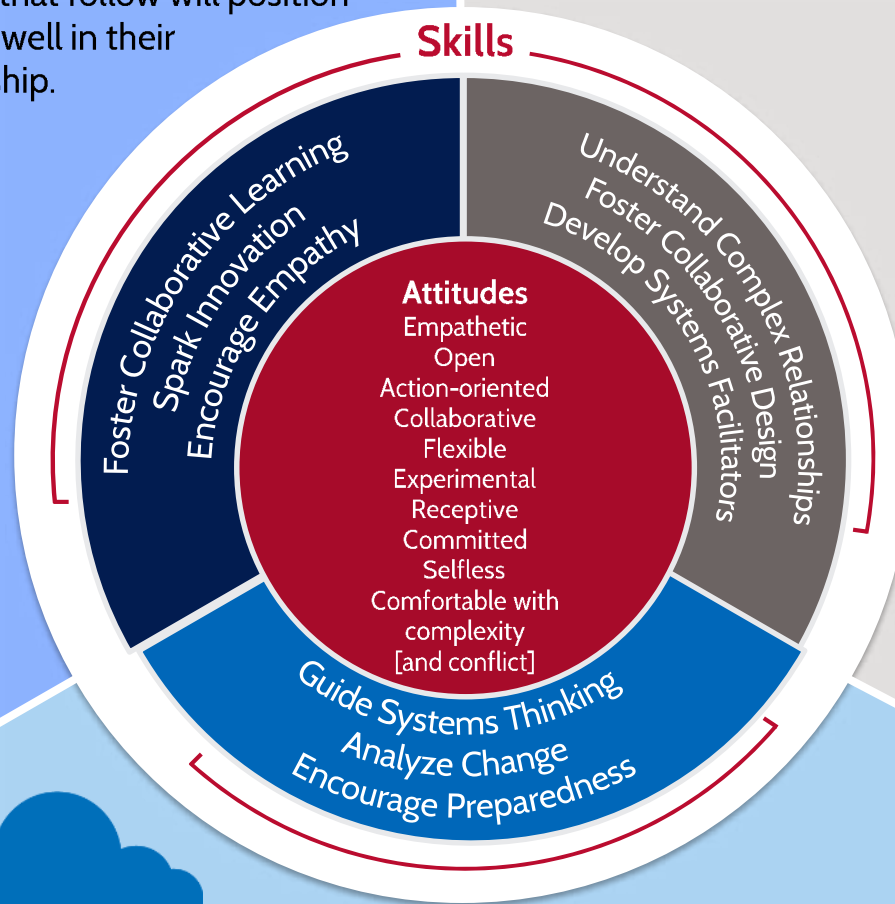
## Actors

The individuals and institutions that interact within a system or are directly affected by it



## Enabling Environment

The political, cultural, economic, social, geographic, and other dimensions in a system that bear on its performance but defy control by any one person



## Linkages

The connections and feedback loops in a system that allow or thwart interactions between people, institutions, ideas, and other forces



# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP SKILL BUILDING

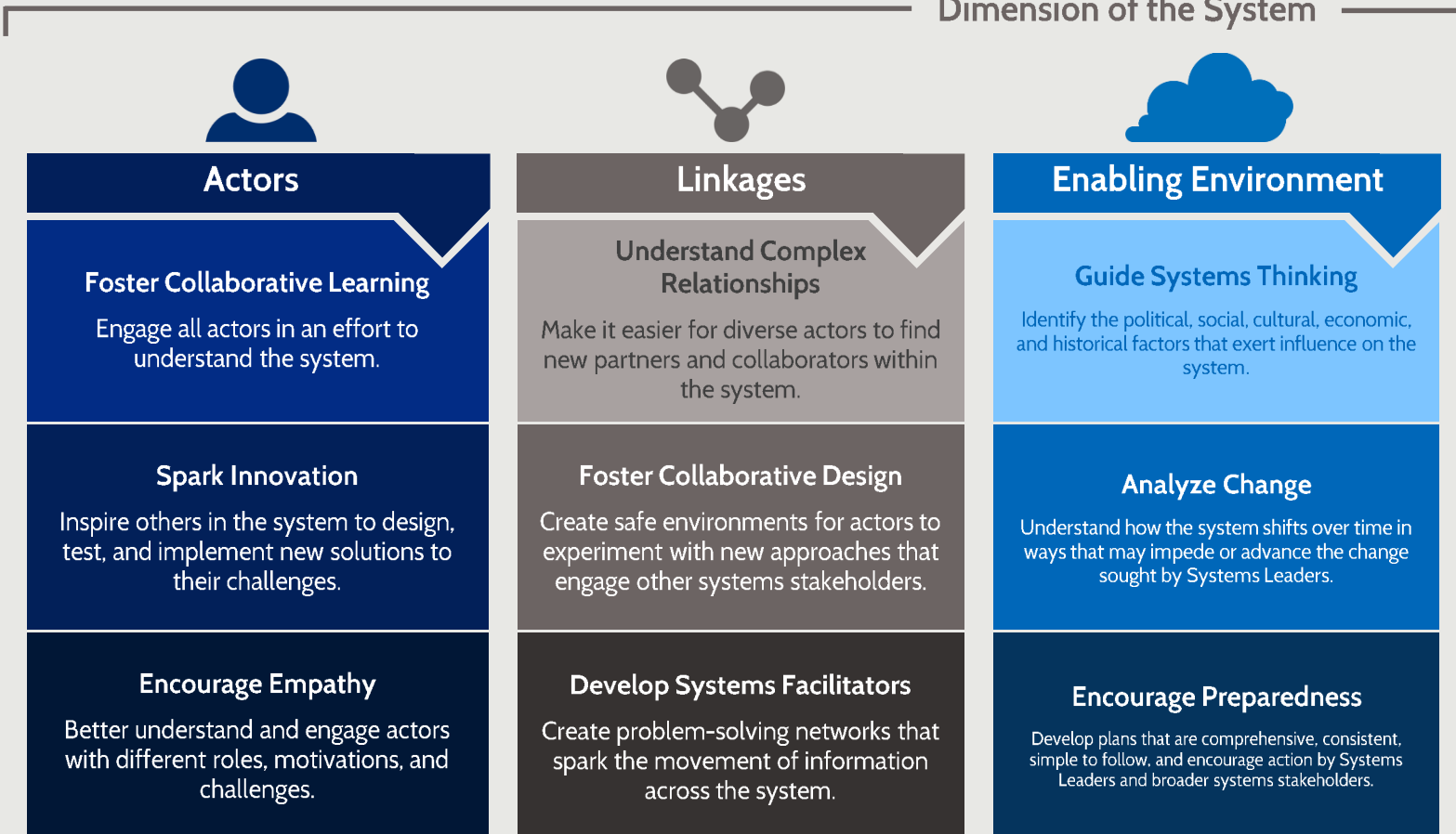
The 9 essential Systems Leadership Skills are further described below.

Depending on the amount of time you have available to devote to skill building, and your desired pace, you may want to focus on different capacities. Using the modular options presented in the learning plan below, you can design a personalized learning pathway to increase your capacity to understand and navigate the complex systems and lead the co-creation of lasting solutions.

An alternative way of thinking about these learning plans is: “What can I do to become a Systems Leader if my interest is primarily as (1) an extracurricular pursuit (see the one month skill builder), (2) supplemental on-the-job training (see the six month skill builder), or (3) critical to the execution of my primary role (see the one year)?”

We recommend thinking about how best to progress through these 9 skills rather than attempting to develop every one simultaneously.

## 9 Key Systems Leadership Skills Organized by Dimension of the System



# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

# SKILL BUILDER

## Spark Innovation

Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.

## Encourage Preparedness

Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.

## Develop Systems Facilitators

Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.

## Analyze Change

1. Sign up for newsletters on trends in your industry or sector of interest.
2. Read the [Leadership Centre's The Art of Change Making guide](#).

## Foster Collaborative Learning

1. Participate in one or more multi-sectoral events to observe group dynamics and different facilitation techniques for fostering collaborative learning.
2. Appraise your team's, network's, or system's knowledge flows to identify preferences, gaps, silos, and opportunities using the [Knowledge Management Assessment Tool \(KMAT\)](#) or a similar diagnostic survey.

## Guide Systems Thinking

1. Read Senge's formative article on [Systems Leadership, The Dawn of System Leadership](#).
2. Read an introductory guide to [Systems Thinking](#), such as Stroh's book [Systems Thinking for Social Change](#).
3. Watch [Oxfam's video on systems thinking for development](#).

If you have **ONE MONTH** to dedicate to Systems Leadership skill-building, or view it as an extracurricular pursuit, follow this learning plan:

## Foster Collaborative Design

Reserve this skill for more advanced skill-building.

## Encourage Empathy

1. Check out [Ashoka's Start Empathy](#) project.
2. Take the [Basadur Profile](#) and [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#) assessments to understand your problem-solving and decision-making styles.
3. Take a test for implicit biases, such as through [Harvard's Project Implicit](#), and encourage your team to do the same.

## Understand Complex Relationships

1. Download and complete an [Influence & Incentives Matrix](#) (pg. 50) to understand actors' different incentives and levels of influence within your system.
2. Play an [agent-based modeling game](#) to understand about the intricacies of interactions between actors in complex systems.
3. Attend a stakeholder meeting with systems actors with whom you hadn't previously engaged.

# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

## Foster Collaborative Learning

1. Activities from 1-month program
2. Understand how adults learn best by reviewing Knowles' [Adult Learning Theory](#).
3. Download the [Actor Mapping & Challenge Mapping](#) (pg. 5) tools and test drive them with your team.
4. Lead Actor Mapping & Challenge Mapping sessions with multi-stakeholder teams from your system.

## Foster Collaborative Design

1. Read up on co-creation literature, such as [this foundational piece](#) by C.K. Prahalad and Venkatram Ramaswamy.
2. Tour a local innovation hub or accelerator.
3. Attend a hackathon or design sprint. Note which design elements, tools, methods, and facilitation techniques best engage the group.
4. Join the [Presencing Institute's u.lab](#), a network of practitioners dedicated to co-creation. Explore their online resources and enroll in any of their courses.

## Encourage Preparedness

1. Learn about visioning tools, such as [Social Transformation Project's Visioning tool](#).
2. Review a current or previous strategy with your recently acquired systems perspective. Analyze the strategy for inclusiveness of actors and feedback loops between actors.

# SKILL BUILDER

## Understand Complex Relationships

1. Activities from 1-month program
2. Learn about systems visualization and mapping tools. [Kumu's data visualization platform](#) provides a useful starting place.
3. Participate in a [Learning Journey](#) to experience the complex interactions, feedback loops, and alignment/misalignment between systems stakeholders.

## Guide Systems Thinking

1. Activities from 1-month program
2. Download and learn about tools for understanding and assessing systems, such as [the Assessing Innovation Potential for Social Impact toolset](#) or [the Systems Thinking Toolkit](#).
3. Take a [Systems Thinking course](#), such as [Acumen & Omidyar's Systems Practice course](#) offered online.
4. Complete a [Systemigram](#) of your system of interest. Invite other actors to participate and/or review it.

## Spark Innovation

1. Read up on Lean Innovation and its rapid iteration, fast fail philosophy. Orient yourself with Blank's [Harvard Business Review article](#).
2. Download, review, and practice tools to improve your innovation skills, such as the [Improved Innovation Decision Making \(IIDM\) Toolset](#) and [DIY Toolkit](#).
3. Deepen your understanding of your organization's or network's culture of innovation by running an [Innovation Culture Assessment](#) (pg. 43). Discuss the results with your team.
4. Attend a hackathon event to observe innovation on hyperdrive.

If you have **SIX MONTHS** to dedicate to Systems Leadership skill-building, or can dedicate on-the-job training, follow this learning plan:

## Analyze Change

1. Activities from 1-month program
2. Learn about embracing change as a leader. Heifetz's book [The Practice of Adaptive Leadership](#) provides a helpful introduction.
3. Sign up for a [Futures Foresight course](#), such as [Stanford's Foresight and Innovation online course](#).
4. Attend a trends or Futures Foresight convening or workshop specific to your interests.

## Encourage Empathy

1. Activities from 1-month program
2. Explore new communication methods that improve your engagement with others, such as [Nonviolent Communication](#).
3. Shadow a peer in another organization or role. Try to select a peer with an alternative viewpoint or someone whose position you're less familiar with.
4. Introduce empathy-building tools to your team, such as from [UX Booth](#) or [The Center for Building Empathy and Compassion](#). Designate deliberate opportunities to put them into practice.

## Develop Systems Facilitators

1. Learn about [Network Theory](#) to understand the collective interests and dynamics of groups.
2. Learn about facilitation best practices. Hunter's [The Art of Facilitation](#) is a useful foundational text.
3. Select activities to practice from the Kauffman Foundation's [Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building Playbook](#) on fostering entrepreneurship in your system.
4. Take a facilitation course for systems practitioners, such as the Collaborative Operating System's [Advanced Course in Facilitation](#), to understand the unique attributes that differentiate a systems facilitator from a traditional coalition-builder.

# SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

# SKILL BUILDER

If you have **ONE YEAR** to dedicate to Systems Leadership skill-building, or see it as critical to your primary role, follow this learning plan:

## Encourage Preparedness

1. Activities from 6-month program
2. Design a new project from the ground up using Futures Foresight tools and a Strategy Guide.
3. Challenge yourself to align your resources within systems, such as by using Geofunder's [systems grantmaking tool](#).

## Foster Collaborative Design

1. Activities from 6-month program
2. Encourage your team to take the [Basadur Profile](#) assessment. Discuss the results in the context of appreciating different problem-solving approaches.
3. Lead a collaborative design event, such as a hackathon or design sprint. Work with your team to assure that feedback elicited is integrated into future planning and design.
4. Design and establish a Community of Practice related to your work. FHI360's [SCALE+](#) principles for system-wide collaborative [action](#) offer useful guidance.

## Encourage Empathy

1. Activities from 1-month & 6-month programs  
Spend time performing [Dialogue Interviews](#) and [Empathy Mapping](#) with diverse stakeholders from your system. Track how your perception of system stakeholders changes as your empathy deepens over time.

## Understand Complex Relationships

1. Activities from 1-month & 6-month programs
2. Create a learning journal to track your own evolving understanding of relationships between your system's actors, linkages, boundaries, and enabling environment.
3. Engage with teams that use [Social Network Analysis \(SNA\)](#) to learn how to integrate their insights into the evolving picture of the systems you seek to lead.
4. Practice creating [Causal Loop Diagrams](#) for different parts of your system. Fact-check them with several systems stakeholder groups.

## Guide Systems Thinking

1. Activities from 1-month & 6-month programs
2. Apply learning from the above Systems Thinking courses and toolsets to analyze your system, find points of leverage, and adapt your programs and approaches to accommodate systems dynamics.

## Spark Innovation

1. Activities from 6-month program
2. Sign up for a short course on fostering innovation, such as INSEAD's [Innovation by Design course](#) or MIT's [Mastering Innovation & Design-Thinking course](#).
3. Practice Lean Innovation approaches, such as rapid prototyping, with your team and other system stakeholders.

## Analyze Change

1. Activities from 1-month & 6-month programs
2. Revamp your project's M&E framework to incorporate systems change.
3. Volunteer as a judge for an innovation challenge relevant to your industry, such as [LAUNCH](#) or [OpenIDEO](#).

## Foster Collaborative Learning

1. Activities from 1-month & 6-month programs
1. Practice storytelling to diverse audiences, learning from tools such as the University of Virginia's Design Thinking for Innovation [Storytelling Tool](#).
2. Experiment with multimodal learning methods, such as [Graphic Recording](#), for your multi-stakeholder events. Track participants' receptivity and engagement.
3. Form a new problem-solving network based on the results of previous Actor Mapping or Challenge Mapping sessions.

## Develop Systems Facilitators

1. Activities from 6-month program
2. Become a champion for nontraditional leaders: practice distributing leadership responsibilities within your team or network.
3. Take a community mobilization course, such as Colorado State University's [Community Mobilization 5-week course](#) for political empowerment.
4. From the new tools and skills that you've gained in previous activities, develop your own "Top 10 toolkit" that you and your fellow Systems Leaders can reference as a sandbox from which to build your own facilitation plans.





# Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning for Systems Leaders

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Guiding questions to bring a Systems  
Leadership perspective to MERL

# APPROACHING MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING AS A SYSTEMS LEADER

Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) can support Systems Leaders in understanding the effects that their strategies and interventions have on the system at large, and help them to uncover how their interventions can be adjusted to achieve greater impacts.

The following pages offer a combination of questions and suggestions that Systems Leaders can consider aimed at MERL. These are written for the benefit of aspiring Systems Leaders working within USAID, on USAID projects, or within development projects supported by other donors. Not all of the questions and suggestions are going to be relevant to every project. Rather the questions and suggestions offered are intended to help the user think about their interventions, how those interventions may be activated within a system, and adaptations that might help to achieve greater systems impact.

The suggestions have been structured around the distinction between the two types of Systems Change: Incremental Change and Transformational Change. For Incremental Change there are two separate slides of suggestions—one page for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and another for Research and Learning (R&L). For Transformational Change, we offer only one slide of MERL suggestions. Suggestions are grouped by system dimension: **actors**, **linkages**, and **enabling environment**.

The flow of the questions offered at each system layer begins with M&E for Incremental Change and then flows into R&L for Incremental Change, and finally to MERL for Transformational Change. Readers are advised to read one layer, for example—actors, and proceed from M&E for Incremental Change to R&L for Incremental Change and then directly to MERL for Transformational Change.



# MONITORING & EVALUATION

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN MONITORING AND EVALUATING INCREMENTAL SYSTEMS CHANGE

Incremental systems change occurs at the level of a single component of the system (e.g., actor, linkage, etc.). The suggestions below are intended to help you think through what your intervention is trying to accomplish, and the ways that you can track change from a systems perspective.



Are actors in the system adopting, replicating, or taking ownership of positive practices, including business models, technologies, or behaviors?

Are actors rejecting or moving away from negative incumbent practices, including business models, technologies, or behaviors?

Are actors within the system changing their mindset, as evidenced by attitudes, public opinion, or other metrics? What groups does this occur for?

Are actors in the system taking on new roles? If so, how are their roles changing?

Are actors within the system being capacitated to lead more effectively on their issues?



How is the flow of information changing? Are previously less-informed actors gaining access to more information?

How is the communication and/or interactions of actors changing? For instance, are competitors becoming more cooperative?

Are actors organizing into new networks or teams? What are these networks and teams doing?

Is there a presence of new or unexpected relationships? How are these forming?

Is the relative strength of connections changing? Are ties between actors growing stronger or weaker than they were before?



Is the flow of financial resources changing? Is finance being accessed by more actors? What is it being used for?

What are the external rules, both formal and informal, that govern how actors interact? Are these rules changing?

Are new institutions being created, or are existing institutions taking on new roles? What are these institutions doing?

Is the role of donors or other third party actors changing? How so?

Are actors collaborating to design policies and strategies that are more visionary, future-oriented, and adaptive?

# RESEARCH & LEARNING

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN MONITORING AND EVALUATING INCREMENTAL SYSTEMS CHANGE

As interventions succeed or fail at generating incremental systems change, a Systems Leader should endeavor to learn. The suggestions presented below offer ideas for the sorts of things a System Leader might want to think about as they observe the system in pursuit of systems change (i.e., during implementation), or after an intervention concludes as they consider designing new interventions.



What aspects of the system enable the diffusion of practices? What aspects of the system impede the diffusion of practices?

What motivates actors to reject or move away from negative incumbent practices? What are the incentives for them to do so, and can these be replicated elsewhere?

What strategies are most successful at influencing mindsets? What patterns can be observed across demographic groups? What can we learn about why strategies resonate with some groups but not others?

Why are actors taking up new roles? What can we learn from their motivations? Are there lessons for how we might incentivize or work with others to take on new roles?

What elements of capacity development are working for these actors? What combination of learning, experiencing, and practicing is helping them to become more effective?



What facilitates the changes in information flows? How are actors communicating differently? How did these changes come about?

What facilitates changes in relationship dynamics? What sustains it? How can this approach be replicated?

How are actors organizing? Who is leading these efforts? Where is this happening in the system?

Where are new relationships forming? Do these relationships exhibit any clustering? What is the strength of these relative to other connections in the system?

What is strengthening the connections between some actors and not others? Is there a shift in their perceptions, incentives, or something else entirely? How can this observation be used to strengthen other relationships?



What is stimulating changes in financial flows? How does this feed into changes in other parts of the system? How can changes in financial flows be further incentivized?

What mechanisms or strategies are being used to change the rules governing interactions? What are the differences between the formal and informal rules?

Where does the momentum for institutional change come from? What mechanisms allow for the creation or transfer of power?

Why is the role of donors or third parties changing? To whom/where are their responsibilities being transferred? What is driving this change e.g., pressures internal or external to the system?

Who is involved in the co-creation of new policies or strategies? Where did the momentum or appetite for these changes come from? How are new actors being brought into the process?



# MONITORING, EVALUATION, RESEARCH & LEARNING FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL SYSTEMS CHANGE

Transformational Systems Change occurs when the actors, linkages, and enabling environment of a system are activated through adjustments to practices, mindsets, relationships, power dynamics, resources, and policies. Unlike incremental systems change, transformational systems change occurs when multiple shifts occur at more than one dimension of the system (e.g., actor, linkages, etc.) sufficient to trigger more dramatic shifts to the entire system. The MERL suggestions offered below can help you consider the ways in which changes in different layers of the system might spillover into other layers on the journey to Transformational Change.



Have beneficial practices been diffused system-wide? Did their diffusion create shifts in the patterns of interaction between actors? How and why?

Have one or more negative incumbent practices been removed entirely from the system? What was the effect of the removal on the relationships of actors? Did it create any unexpected changes?

Have both the winners in the system and those that have been hurt by the system come to a common understanding of the challenges and the need for change? What is this common understanding? How was it reached?

Is there a presence of actors with entirely new functions within the system? What role are they inhabiting that was not present before? Why is this role needed in the system?

Is there a proliferation of leadership within the system? Have actors who have built their leadership skills started capacitating other actors to become leaders as well?



Is knowledge being shared across the system? Have information asymmetries been eliminated for necessary information inputs? How has this empowered actors or changed the way they interact?

Have the power dynamics of the system been altered by changes in the way actors communicate or interact? How did changes in interactions flip these dynamics? Who has power that didn't before?

Are new networks or teams taking on leadership roles within the system? How are they applying their influence? What changes are they driving?

Have new relationships catalyzed the diffusion of resources into new parts of the system? What effects did this have on those actors?

Have changes in the strength of connections helped empower new actors? How are they using these connections? How is this different than the previous status quo?



Have changes to the flow of finance disrupted the status quo of the system? How did changes reverberate throughout the system? What secondary effects were triggered by the shifts in financial flows?

Have new patterns of interaction emerged in the system? How did changes to the rules governing interactions drive the emergence of these new patterns?

Has a new institutional framework and/or governance modality been established? How does this effect actors and their relationships?

Has the need for donors or other third party actors been eliminated from the system? How has the system evolved to eliminate the need for outside support?

Has increased collaboration in the governance process helped establish new rules for the system? How has this changed the way actors interact?



Researched by:

**Global Knowledge Initiative**

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