# System Change Strategy

How do we design strategies to achieve systems change?

"David Orr, professor of Environmental Studies at Oberlin College, likes to tell the story of the entrance exam for the insane asylum. Candidates are led into a cement-lined room with a row of faucets on one wall, fully open, gushing water. Leaning against the opposite wall are dozens of buckets and mops. The insane run frantically for the buckets and mops. The sane turn off the faucets. If that's the test, we live in a land that's certifiably crazy. Name a problem. With astounding consistency, we go for the mop-and-bucket solution."

Donella Meadows,
"Mop-and-Bucket Solutions Keep Us Forever Cleaning Up", 1995
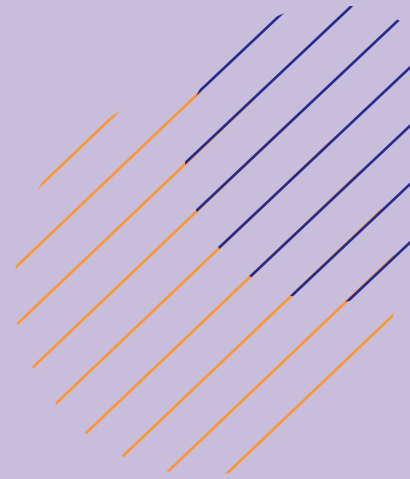
Principle 1: Think holistically, not mechanistically

Systems thinking helps us to understand the forces that keep a social problem in place despite our efforts to alleviate the symptoms for as many people as possible. It creates an awareness of the complex roles and relationships within the system, of policies and incentives, and of resource flows and feedback loops. In this way, it acts as an antidote to mop-and-bucket solutions.

Take deforestation as an example. One mop-and-bucket solution is simply to plant new trees. This solution does not address any of the reasons that trees are being cut down in the first place, which means that the problem will likely reoccur. That is why Ashoka Fellow Nicolas Métro, a participant of the Ashoka Globalizer Program, is taking a systems-level approach. Métro realized that because there are no value chains for living trees, local communities are incentivized to sell the timber and use the land for other purposes. Based on this insight, he began identifying dysfunctional and emerging value chains in the hopes of fixing them or accelerating their development. For example, in Togo, communities were using the leafs of Morgina trees to create a food supplement that is very effective at reducing child malnutrition. This was not enough to save these trees, though, because the quality of the supplement was too varied to sell in large quantities. Métro developed a strategy to introduce a quality standard, including technical specifications, a certification scheme, and a quality control mechanism. With the quality standard in place, this value chain is a sustainable alternative to deforestation.

Value-chains are only one type of system that social entrepreneurs can change. Systems thinking can also be applied to the criminal justice system, the education system, family dynamics, and nearly any other area of society. The point of this example is that systems thinking often leads to new ideas that a mop-and-bucket perspective would find counter-intuitive. Why would a quality standard for oil save forests in Togo? It also demonstrates that a single intervention is rarely enough to solve a complex problem. In order to effectively address deforestation, Métro needs to build a coalition of local businesses, industry representatives, and policy makers who understand the many factors contributing to the problem.

There is a risk that participants will follow the same mechanistic approach to social change that underlies mop-and-bucket solutions: "in this system, element A causes problem B; therefore, we need to change A." This risk can be mitigated by experienced mentors and facilitators. If you hear the following quotes from participants, chances are high that the support program managed to promote holistic thinking:

- "When we started, we didn't realize that our issue A is actually related to C and D."
- "We realized that if we just change A, we will not just achieve B; we will also create a number of unintended consequences."

Tips for Supporters:

- Ask participants open-ended questions such as, "what else could be relevant here?", "what other consequences could this intervention have?", and "how would the situation change if this hypothesis turns out to be wrong?"
- Use games to help participants recognize how complex the issues that they are dealing with are. "The Systems Thinking Playbook" by Sweeney and Meadows provides ideas to get started.

Resources

- Book: Thinking in Systems by Donella Meadows
- Book: Systems Thinking for Social Change by David Peter Stroh
- Article: "Beyond Organizational Scale: How Social Entrepreneurs Create Systems Change" by Skoll/Schwab
- Toolkit: Social Impact Educator Toolkit by Map the System

"Systems thinking is a way of knowing that is not taught in our education system, where the focus is on breaking things down and looking at the parts individually. This is a big barrier for achieving impact on a systems level."

Laura Winn, Head of School of Systems Change

Principle 2: Map systems to the extent that it's useful for your work

Systems thinking is often associated with complicated-looking maps full of boxes and arrows. If participants have a background in System Dynamics or computer modelling, or if they simply enjoy the analytical rigor that these exercises require, detailed maps can be a powerful tool to promote a better understanding of the system and generate new insights. However, in-depth systems mapping is not a requirement for an effective impact strategy. Ashoka Globalizer uses only three simple exercises in its advisory process. Many of the finalists in the Map the System competition (discussed below) identify the key dynamic of a system with very simple maps, and some present their findings without any maps at all.

Intermediaries supporting social entrepreneurs should be clear about the role that system mapping plays in their program and choose tools accordingly. For example, at Ashoka Globalizer, system mapping is used to identify the most attractive systems change goals from a list of potential objectives. Participants are often experts with decades of experience in their fields. The program helps participants highlight an important dynamic in a system that they want to change, rather than trying to deepen their understanding of the issue in question. For this purpose, simple frameworks like 5R or Waters of Systems Change (see references below) are sufficient. On the other hand, if a program wants to help a cross-sector alliance come to a shared understanding about systemic issues, a longer and more thorough set of exercises (such as the one presented in the course "Systems Practice" by Acumen and the Omidyar Group) may be required.

No matter how systems are mapped, participants should be clear about which systems and subsystems they want to influence. For example, in the U.S., the education system, healthcare system, labour market, and criminal justice system all influence the number of people in prison. Within the criminal justice system, a team could look at various sub-systems, like policing, bail, prisons, and court proceedings.

Participants should know which of these sub-systems they are targeting, which elements of these sub-systems they want to change, and what that change should look like. Although these ideas will evolve as participants learn and experiment, they provide an important sense of direction and a helpful starting point.

Tips for Supporters:

- Provide your participants access to mentors with expertise in systems thinking.
- Be comfortable with a range of systems thinking tools, from easy-to-use frameworks for a quick one-hour discussion to rigorous methodologies for more in-depth analyses.
- Test and refine your system map or analysis so it captures the complexity needed but isn't so complex that it inhibits clear understanding.
- Make the benefits of systems thinking available without requiring participants to learn about the technicalities. Good facilitators can discuss systemic issues using the language of participants.

Resources:

- Article: "Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System" by Donella Meadows
- Article: "The Water of Systems Change" by FSG
- Article: "The 5 Rs Framework in the Program Cycle" by USAID
- Article: "Systems Change – Big or Small?" by Odin Mühlenbein
- Module: www.changemaking.net by Odin Mühlenbein and Reem Rahman
- Module: Systems Practice by Odin Mühlenbein and Reem Rahman
- Systems Modelling Tool: Kumu
- Systems Modelling Tool: InsightMaker

"Systemic impact requires power mapping and time to study the ecosystem."

Joseph Nkandu, Ashoka Fellow, Founder and CEO of NUCAFE, participant of the Ashoka Globalizer Program

Principle 3: Include multiple perspectives

Participants must recognize that their perspective is only one among many, and that in order to be successful, they must learn from and incorporate the perspectives of others. This is a fundamental tenet of systems thinking and should be promoted as part of a systems thinking mindset.

In practical terms, it is important for participants to include diverse perspectives when they analyse systems and develop strategies. Participants should consider consulting other civil-society organizations, competitors, academics, and, most importantly, the people directly affected by a given social issue. As in the previous principle, intermediaries supporting social entrepreneurs should be clear about the goal of these consultations. At Ashoka Globalizer, our goal is to make sure that the systems change goal that a participant has identified resonates with potential partners and other experts. In Oxford's Map the System competition (see Example 2 further below), teams start with only a limited understanding of the system that they want to analyse and conduct up to 100 interviews over the course of several months before summarizing their findings.

It's also important to ensure that the voices of stakeholder groups inform participants' analysis, if not the strategy itself. Stakeholders are any actors in the system who impact or are impacted by the change we seek—for example, community members or policymakers.

Tips for Supporters:

- Help participants understand the need to build trust among vulnerable stakeholders in the system and to find out what they need to be able to contribute their experiences, perspectives, and ideas to the work.
- Use games and case studies of failed initiatives to help participants recognize that their perspective on a system or social issue is limited.
- Invite alumni of your program to talk about the insights that they have gained by including additional perspectives.
- If your program has a topical focus, create a pool of people with relevant experiences that participants can use to broaden their understanding.

Resources:

- Tool: Impact Gaps Canvas by Daniela Papi-Thornton
- Tool: Sensing Journeys by The Presencing Institute

"Ashoka's recognition has given more dignity to our role and more awareness of the possibility that we could truly generate change. So, while initially the vision was to change the lives of people in detention, we then realized that we could generate systemic change, and at that point we made a qualitative leap in the vision. We understood that we could really influence change, and this certainly has been given to us by Ashoka."

Ashoka Fellow, Italy

Principle 4: Unleash dormant energy

Impact strategies are often approached with a traditional business mindset. These strategies focus on growing the venture, accumulating resources, and becoming powerful enough to make change happen. We call this the Brute Force approach. In many cases, a better way to achieve system change is to unlock resources in a system that currently lie dormant. This can include money, talent, goodwill, information, and power. To unlock these resources, social entrepreneurs can inspire others to act, align actors behind a cause, help others to be more effective, and/or give people new roles in a system. We call this the Jiu Jitsu approach, and we have found that it is a much more effective strategy for catalysing change. Intermediaries should help social entrepreneurs to move from a Brute Force approach to a Jiu Jitsu approach.

The following quotes are good reasons to believe that a support program for social entrepreneurs has successfully moved participants towards a Jiu Jitsu approach:

• "We thought that we needed to train this group of people, when in fact with a small tweak the existing system could do that much better."

• "Instead of promoting this particular policy change, we now make it easier for communities to organize and speak for themselves."

Tips for Supporters:

- Challenge social entrepreneurs to leverage and link existing resources to the cause that they care about. Good questions include: "who is in the best position to do this?", "who else has an interest in this?", "is what you need available somewhere, and could you somehow use it for your purposes?"
- Challenge social entrepreneurs to identify the levers for impact that require the least effort from them. Good questions include: "who are the most important actors that shape the system you aim to change"; "rank those actors according to operational efforts needed to influence them, scale of impact and probability of success"; "if you had one attempt, which strings would you pull"?

Resources:

- Article: "Systemic and Empowering" by Alexandra Ioan, Odin Mühlenbein, and Olga Shirobokova
- Module: Systems Change Crash Course by Odin Mühlenbein and Reem Rahman

"Our Design Grants cover up to $500,000 and support for partners to refine their strategy for systems change."

Silvia Bastante de Unverhau, Chief Philanthropy Officer at Co-Impact

Indicators

If you want to support social entrepreneurs to unleash their full impact potential, or if you want to identify programs that properly support social entrepreneurs in systems thinking, we suggest asking the following questions:

- Do the program facilitators have expertise in systems thinking?
- Does the program introduce the concept of systems change?
- Do participants analyse the systems that they want to change?
- Do participants develop a clear statement of their intended systems change?
- Are participants encouraged to include diverse stakeholders in their strategy development process?

Example 1: Ashoka Globalizer

- 14-week virtual strategy process followed by a 3-day conference
- http://ashokaglobalizer.org
- Founded in 2010
- 27 cohorts / ~400 participants (as of September 2020)

Ashoka Globalizer is a strategy accelerator program that focuses on systems change. The program is run in cohorts, which consist of 10-15 experienced social entrepreneurs from around the world who are working in a specific topic area, like "Healthcare in Africa" or "Education and Technology." Globalizer provides each social entrepreneur with a team of thought partners, including at least one member of the Ashoka team, one senior manager or entrepreneur from the Ashoka network, and one management consultant (usually from McKinsey). Advisory teams are distributed across the world.

Over the course of 14 weeks, each team goes through a structured, 5-step process: problem analysis, systemic root cause analysis, prioritization of a targeted systems change goal, creation of a "Systems Change Story", and design of concrete initiatives and replication techniques. For each step, Globalizer provides tools, exercises, and experienced facilitators. Social entrepreneurs and their thought partners are expected to spend 5 hours and 2 hours per week on exercises, respectively.
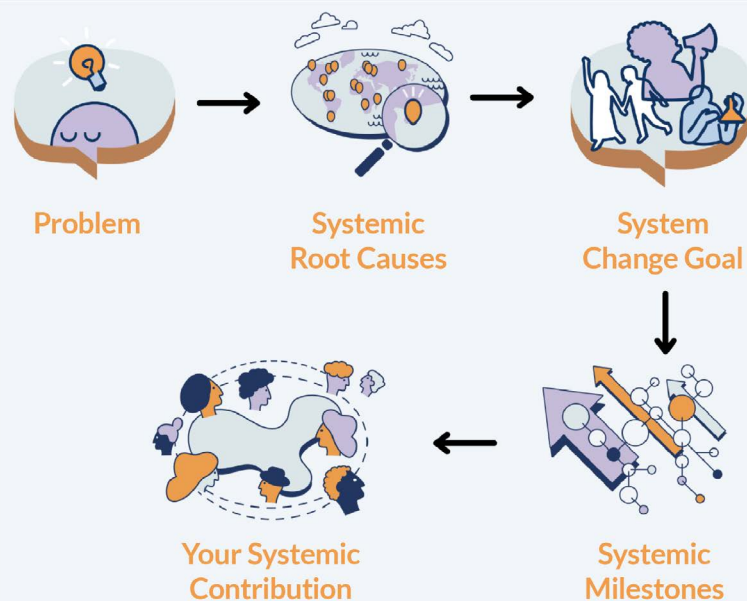
After the advisory process, the participants convene at a 3-day conference to share their ideas, get feedback from peers and senior decision-makers in their field, and network with potential partners.

"Once you pass the Globalizer process, you start to figure out how your impact can change, not just to increase or scale the number of beneficiaries, but rather systemic changes."

Gaby Arenas, Ashoka Fellow

"The Ashoka Globalizer program with systems change approach is so relevant to my work. At first, I focused only on a grass roots level but by joining the Globalizer, the organization and I were forced to think bigger in the next several years and how PeaceGeneration can play roles in the system."

Irfan Amalee, Ashoka Fellow

"The experience was rewarding and enlightening (I learned MUCH about systems change and healthcare in Latin America)."

Steven Harutunian, pro bono advisor at Ashoka Globalizer and Senior Manager Strategy at Philips

Example 2: Map the System

- Global, multi-stage student competition culminating in 3 days of final presentations and workshops at the University of Oxford
- https://mapthesystem.web.ox.ac.uk/
- Founded in 2015
- >1,100 teams in 2019 (>2,500 total) in partnership with over 34 universities and educational partners globally

Map the System is a global competition hosted by Oxford's Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship that aims to foster systems thinking among budding changemakers.

Unlike traditional business plan competitions, which ask participants to pitch solutions to a specific problem, Map the System invites participants to pitch their understanding of the broader system in which a specific problem exists. Participants are not asked to provide a solution, but instead to highlight a deep understanding of the current state of their challenge and its root causes.

Educators from partner institutions organise localised editions of Map the System on their campus and can incorporate the competition into their for-credit curriculum or run it as an extracurricular programme.

The competition is loosely based on Daniela Papi-Thornton's Impact Gaps Canvas, a tool used to facilitate the understanding of a problem by mapping the challenge and solutions landscape and identifying "gaps" and possible paths to impact. The tool aims to prevent duplication and help entrepreneurs learn from the successes and failures of existing initiatives.

"Our world needs people who "think in systems", perhaps now more than ever, to work together to address the challenges of our time. Map the System is less a competition than a platform to support the development of systems thinking and connect emerging systems leaders."

Jill Andres, Map the System Global Final 2020 Judge

"One of the institutional learning outcomes of our college is a systems thinking mindset – yet I feel this approach is underutilized in the classroom and in teaching. Map the System provided an engaging and well-organized structure, and resources, and a fun way to bring this incredibly valuable approach into my teaching on global development."

MTS 2020 Educator

"In this new context for leadership, strategic communication will help to organize an ongoing conversation which ultimately will lead everyone as an active player into a collaborative journey of mindset transformation. This is the path to turn everyone into a changemaker. Leadership in the age of social networks is above all someone who understands the conversational nature of human society and the communicative nature of organizations."

Ricardo Neves, Ashoka Fellow, Brazil, author of the book "Sensemaking: Leadership for Purpose – Strategic Communication for a World of Exponential Complexity"