

Systems thinking: reimagining public services to tackle inequality

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This self-assessment is a slightly adapted version of a tool developed by Susan Misra, CoDirector, Management Assistance Group (<http://systems.geofunders.org/self-assessment/social-sector>).

A Systems Change Self-Assessment

Background

Those involved in public service delivery and reform have a history of contributing to systems change. Such change includes:

- **Expanding or innovating** a service that alleviates the immediate needs around a particular problem through more and/or better service (e.g. drugs treatment services or employability services);
- **Coordinating** service delivery and/or policy development to achieve a systems-level outcome (e.g. closing the educational attainment gap);
- **Redirecting resources and attention** from one part of the system to another (e.g., stimulating consumer demand for sustainably sourced fish or lower carbon energy);
- Addressing the **root causes** of a problem (e.g. reduce fossil fuels);
- Creating an **alternative system** (e.g. local sustainable economies); and
- Building a **movement** with many diverse organizations and individuals using multiple strategies simultaneously to change systems at scale.

The people involved in systems change initiatives develop a strong grasp of the fundamentals. These basics have become well-known best practices (e.g. seeing the big picture of interrelationships, focusing on root causes rather than symptoms, and grounding solutions in the perspective of people directly affected). Public service actors continue to innovate and strengthen the tools, methods, and frameworks for systems change. This includes learning how to influence complex systems, developing a group's capacity for systems thinking, integrating equity and power sharing into systems change efforts, and bridging strategy and implementation to achieve transformative results.

How are you integrating systems thinking into your work? Take this assessment to help you reflect on this, and how you might further develop.

Instructions

In this self-assessment, it assumes you are part of a group of people thinking about, or already involved in, some degree of change in what can be understood as your (or one) 'local system' (e.g. this could be based around a specific geographic area, a specific sector-justice, health, or a specific issue such as child poverty).

This group is referred to as the team. Most of the activities below are done by the team – not by you alone. However, as you take the assessment, you should answer for yourself and not for the team. What are you doing directly and indirectly through the team?

If you are working on multiple initiatives, it is best to **reflect on your experience in one project or initiative over time** when answering these questions.

For each of the following statements, indicate how frequently you do the action or strategy. It will take 5 to 7 minutes to complete this assessment.

Interrelationships

1. How frequently do you think about the **interrelationships** between all the parts in a system, their relationships to the whole, and what emerges out of the **whole**? *Definition: Think of parts broadly — social, ecological, legal, economic, political, and many others.*

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Structures and Archetypes

2. How frequently do you step back to see the **structures** or **archetypes** that are governing a system?

Definition: Structures and archetypes refer to the relationships among patterns over time (e.g. limits to growth or increasing voter disenfranchisement).

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Inequalities

3. How frequently do you understand how inequalities emerge at the **individual, interpersonal, institutional or organisational, and structural levels** of a system?

Definition: Inequalities are differences that are disproportionate for some more than others.

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Engage

4. How frequently do you engage system **stakeholders (e.g. the general public, or people who make use of public services) who are directly affected and those who usually are not included** to understand and be responsive to their perspectives?

Definition: Engage could be informing, consulting, or involving more closely.

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Map

5. How frequently do you map out the **social network(s)** and continually reflect on how these relationships, group dynamics and power differences among network actors might affect the system over time?

Definition: A social network refers to who people are, the different relationships among them and the quality and purpose of those relationships.

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Surfacing differences

6. How frequently do you surface different perspectives among partners or stakeholders and have **challenging conversations** to address these differences (e.g., around mental models, strategies, identities, power)

Definition: A mental model is the set of beliefs, values and assumptions that individuals have about a system.

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Consolidate and share power

7. How frequently do you **consolidate and share power** among stakeholders or partners?

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Assumptions

8. How frequently do you think about how a local system may be affected by **different assumptions, contexts** (e.g. a particular point in time or a specific geographical area) **and unintended consequences**?

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Emergence

9. How frequently do you think about how the system may be affected by **emergence**. This means that as one part of the system changes, other parts of the system change in response, and vice versa. New parts of the system, patterns of behavior, and properties can be generated within, and across, a system at any time.

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Unexpected Patterns

10. How frequently do you think about how the system may be affected by **unexpected patterns of behavior**? Examples include irregular patterns (e.g., ups and downs), unstable patterns (e.g., when the pace of change speeds up or slows down) and tipping points (e.g., permanent systems change).

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

Learn and Adapt

11. How frequently do you participate in **an iterative and experimental process to learn and continually adapt the team's strategy**. That is, frequently assess the system, what you are doing, and why and change your strategy (and possibly your goals) based on what you learn? *Definition: The iterative and experimental process ensures that you use rapid feedback loops for learning what is and is not working in real time.*

Circle one of the following answers:

- a. Never
- b. Occasionally or Sometimes
- c. Frequently
- d. Always or Continuously
- e. N/A or Don't Know

About you

A. What sector do you work in? *Circle one of the following answers.*

Education

Environment

Health

Justice

Local/Central Government

Social Care

Sport/Culture

Third Sector

Other- describe _____

B. What is the geographic focus of your work? *Circle one of the answers:*

Neighbourhood or Community

Local Authority/Community Planning Partnership Area

Regional

Scotland-wide

UK-wide

C. What are you most interested in learning more about? *Circle all that apply.*

Understanding or analyzing a system

Developing a strategy for systems change

Convening representatives of my local system

Developing the leaders of a systems change initiative

Building trusting relationships and/or navigating power differences among systems change players

Evaluating systems change efforts and/or continually learning and adapting

Shifting my organisation's processes and structures so we can better do systems change work

Building the case for my organisation to get involved in systems change

Understanding Your Assessment Results

To understand your results

- A. Count the number of times you answered in Column A and multiply by 0. Enter your answer here: _____.
- B. Count the number of times you answered in Column B and multiply by 1. Enter your answer here: _____.
- C. Count the number of times you answered in Column C and multiply by 2. Enter your answer here: _____.
- D. Count the number of times you answered in Column D and multiply by 3. Enter your answer here: _____.
- E. Count the number of times you answered in Column E and multiply by 0. Enter your answer here: _____.

Add up your answers for A to E. Enter your answer here: _____. This is your **total score**.

Read about your profile below based on your total score

Your answers represent a point in time — where you currently are in your systems change initiative. They do not necessarily represent where you would like to be or where you are heading. Your answers are also specific to this initiative, particularly given limitations in your role and/or in what the team does. You may exercise different capabilities in other situations. Also, your answers may vary from answers that other team members would give. It can help to have everyone on the team take the systems change assessment to see how much variation there is within the team and to compare your results to the team average.

What have you learned about where you are today in integrating systems thinking into your change initiative? If you want to strengthen your systems change approach, go back over your answers to reflect on how you and your change initiative could develop in the future by:

- Reinforcing and building on your strengths (i.e., where you answered in column “D”);
- Learning more about unknown areas or less frequently used areas (i.e., where you answered in column “A” or “B”); and
- Increasing the frequency or depth of your practice until it becomes second nature.

0 to 11: Systems could be a new lens for you or there may be limits to how your change initiative incorporates a systems mindset.

If this is a new lens, you could use this resource guide which offers a broad range of further material on systems thinking and practical tools: <http://systems.geofunders.org/tools-resources>. This should help you to learn how to apply systems resources to your change initiative.

If there are limits to how your change initiative incorporates systems thinking, consider what role you can play in bringing this to the team's attention. One idea is to have your team take the systems change assessment to identify gaps and strengths. Also consider developing clear roles for each team member to play; the functions assessed here may be distributed among different team members or shared by all.

12 to 21: You may have begun to incorporate a systems mindset into your change initiative.

You could use this resource guide to continue to formalize and expand how the initiative approaches systems change: <http://systems.geofunders.org/tools-resources>

With your team aim to develop shared language to understand and influence systems. Have the team take the systems change assessment to identify strengths and gaps. Find out which team members have a reputation for being skilled and experienced with systems change, and draw on them to help deepen the capacity of the team overall. Explore the resources to learn about the breadth of systems resources that you could apply to your change initiative. Consider experimenting with one resource that fits within your team's existing processes.

22 to 27: You may have already incorporated a systems mindset into your change initiative and be building the skills, competencies, structures, and processes to support systemic change.

Think how to deepen systems thinking throughout your team and down into each participating organisation. Consider having all the members of your team take the systems change assessment. Discuss your results together to identify similarities, differences, and one or two team-wide practices to strengthen and develop. Explore the resources and experiment with a new one that might shift your team's perspectives or choices.

28 to 33: You may be a leader in systems thinking.

You could use this resource guide to explore more advanced resources <http://systems.geofunders.org/tools-resources>. See if there are new techniques to incorporate into your systems change initiative. You could seek out the additional reading to go deeper into systems thinking and complexity. You could also use this guide to engage stakeholders who are new to systems change. Finally, you could develop ways to sustain and continually orient new team members to the systems change approach.