

## System perspectives will slow us down and that's a good thing!

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*"Casually, in everyday talk we speak of 'the education system', 'the prison system', the 'transport system', etc., as if these were integrated coordinated wholes with each part contributing coherently to the performance of the whole. [...] The word 'system' has been captured by everyday language to refer, without precision, to any large more-or-less connected entity."*<sup>2</sup>

**Key recommendations** - There is nothing special about a system perspective because all social problems are always situated in systems. System is just a fancy word for people's everyday reality, the ways in which they relate to each other and to their institutional and material environment. These relations create situations that offer opportunities and constraints to people and thus affect the choices available to them. Many philanthropic organizations now embrace explicit system perspectives and one wonders what they have been doing before? Those who adopt a system lens can, however, make the perspective useful beyond mere rhetoric. A system approach offers an important opportunity to address some pathologies that hamper philanthropy. But this benefit often requires changing attitudes that privilege Western expertise and ideologies, financial resources, strategic plans, and a "scientific" approach to enacting, measuring, and demonstrating impact. System perspectives may entice us to look more broadly and more deeply at the architecture of social situations and problems. This approach will slow us down. It takes time, genuine effort, and commitment to develop effective channels of engagement with systems. Deep engagement is required to explore the three dimensions of systems that I develop and characterize in this manuscript: i) situation spaces, ii) behavioral architectures, and iii) problem spaces. This exploration rewards us greatly by mobilizing system resources such as indigenous knowledge and gaining the commitment of a broader set of actors. Ideally, this crucial learning of the architecture, the hurdles, and the potential of systems leads to wasting fewer resources on ineffective initiatives. Embedding ownership for change efforts within systems can help balance tendencies to prematurely specify solutions and objectives that are grounded in the ideologies of actors who are often not part of the target system. System work is not about solutions, it is about discovering and steering pathways for change. This approach rests on engaging stakeholders to unearth rather than suppress the varieties of perceptions on the same situation, the various vulnerabilities and power dynamics at play, and the different preferences for what should be done to enact change. Dealing with situations and social problems in a systemic manner disciplines us to develop attitudes of seeking small improvements that constitute change at the pace of our learning capacities and what local communities can enact and absorb. This attitude of simple steps, simple benefits is often counter to our impatience and to our inflated visions of grand impact and big bets. Sometimes, we may even have to temporarily sideline our goals and do something simple just to build momentum that is perceived as beneficial. Building trust by generating simple benefits, creating platforms for effective communication, and seeing the world through the eyes of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Porticus for supporting my research.

<sup>2</sup> Checkland, P. (2011) Systems thinking and soft systems methodology, in: Robert D Galliers, Wendy Currie (eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Management Information Systems: Critical Perspectives and New Directions. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.89.

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communities we seek to work with are the starting points for effective system work. As such, effective system work is no different from effective philanthropic work in general<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The term philanthropy as used in this paper refers to organizations that cater to social problems that are not effectively addressed by the public sector or markets. This paper does not distinguish formally between philanthropic funders and those who implement solutions to concrete social problems. Furthermore, no specific distinction is made between philanthropic and development work.

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