



taos community foundation

What is SYSTEM LEVEL CHANGE?

“There is no single correct way to do systems change.”

AMANDA BESWICK, OAK FOUNDATION

Systemic change is generally understood to **require adjustments or transformations in the policies, practices, power dynamics, social norms or mindsets that underlie the societal issue at stake.**

The concepts and language surrounding systems change may be new to some, but acting systemically is something that many in the social sector already do by putting beneficiaries at the center of their work. *It is essential that systems interventions remain rooted in action and do not become removed from the people in society they are designed to help.*

Systems-level interventions hold great potential for positive social change, with the ability to alter the structure and the rules of a social system. On the other hand, intervening to meet people’s immediate needs—such as feeding someone who is hungry—is also much needed, but these interventions tend not to be able to significantly shift the dial on the *root causes of social problems.*

PLANNING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

- **PRINCIPLE 1: Understand needs and assets**
- **PRINCIPLE 2: Engage multiple actors**
- **PRINCIPLE 3: Map the systems**

DOING SYSTEMS CHANGE

- **PRINCIPLE 4: Do it together**
- **PRINCIPLE 5: Distribute leadership**
- **PRINCIPLE 6: Foster a learning culture**

New allies: How governments can unlock the potential of social entrepreneurs for the common good

We can use the term system change to describe an **outcome** as well as an **approach** to social change.

In terms of an outcome, we describe a change as systemic if the way a system operates shifted and as a result produces a more positive outcome *itself.*

A system change follows a change in the root causes of an issue, as opposed to a surface level change which only addresses symptoms – meaning a change effort has not shifted the system to a new state, it is only adding more positive outcomes to existing dynamics.

While adding proven positive outcomes by offering products or services to those experiencing an issue is often one of the early steps for engaging with and learning about a dysfunctional system, scaling an organization in order to offer more of the same interventions will rarely be sufficient to fundamentally change how it works and address the issue at a significant scale.

As an **approach**, system change therefore requires a break away from the linear relationship and instead employs strategies based on scaling *indirect* impact – allowing much further reach with a given amount of resources by focusing on changing existing dynamics.

For effective use of this approach, *openness* and *collaboration* are critical.

System change of course needs system thinking, continuous learning, and adaptation.

By thoughtfully considering the dynamic interconnected elements of a system like roles, relationships, norms, and needs, it is possible to lower the risks of unintended consequences and increase the chances of finding powerful leverage points for intervention.

Lastly, while system change naturally aims for *larger*-scale impact in relative terms, our definition is not bound to it being *large*-scale in absolute terms. As an approach to change it utilizes indirect impact to help a system produce more positive outcomes. In the same vein, system change is not bound to large-scale organizations. In fact, even the smallest can and have achieved system change. (Ashoka.org)

Systems change captures the idea of addressing the causes, rather than the symptoms, of a societal issue by taking a holistic (or ‘systemic’) view. *Systemic change is generally understood to require adjustments or transformations in the policies, practices, power dynamics, social norms or mindsets that underlie the societal issue at stake. It often involves the collaboration of a diverse set of players and can take place on a local, national or global level.*

Scaling Solutions Toward Shifting Systems: Approaches for Learning, Approaches for Impact (2018)

Shifting, reconfiguring, and transforming:

- Mind-sets, mental models, and paradigms
- Patterns, underlying structures, and ways of operating
- Dynamics and relationships

In order to:

- Address underlying root causes
- Deal with complex, uncertain, and interconnected systems that are ever-changing
- Engage in the potential of living systems
- Solve big social issues

Through intentional process and design, purposeful interventions, and conscious, deliberate approaches such as

- Growing the number of people who think and act systemically
- Enabling and supporting leaders with the power to convene systems
- Strengthening capacity and processes to engage
- Strategic, multi-stakeholder approaches, coming together across systems
- Having an inner awareness of the whole

With the outcome of creating, enduring and positively affecting

- Different behaviors and outcomes
- Resilient, lasting, and better results
- Building a bridge to a better tomorrow
- Increased systems health
- Positive social change
- Just, sustainable, and compassionate societies
- A new normal, the emergence of a new system and a new reality