Our Systems Change Approach

Current Thinking as of March 2019

Courtesy of Juan Arredondo/Getty Images Reportage
Our (Evolving) Approach to Systems Change

We are interested in how you think about achieving and sustaining change, and do not wish to impose any one model. At the same time, in the interest of transparency, you may find it useful to see how we think about system change. We believe that systems change is most likely to succeed when a strategic, adaptive organization develops a winning coalition to advance a transformative initiative, which targets a specific key fulcrum or leverage point in the system. Our thinking is evolving as we continue to learn from our partners and practice. At present, our approach to systems change has seven key components as follows:

1. Systems change starts with a transformative idea

We believe that good ideas deserve to spread and scale. Yet not all good ideas are suited to successful systems change efforts. To succeed, the core idea should reflect at least three key components:
   - The idea responds to a clearly identified problem that it is trying to solve, including its political institutional constraints.
   - The idea can be phrased in simple terms that people can understand and explain back to you.
   - The idea has been shown to work in multiple, similar, real-world contexts and has been validated by independent evidence generated by a credible third party using rigorous methods (even as we acknowledge that a good idea cannot simply be copied and pasted).

2. We do not try to change every aspect of the system, but instead focus on a key lever or “fulcrum”

We recognize that there are different ways to pursue systems change. When trying to make large scale change, it is tempting to comprehensively diagnose and address everything that is wrong with a system. But the challenge with that approach is that it can become overwhelming, prohibitively expensive, complicated, and simply too much to address all at one time. Just like the person who makes 50 New Year’s resolutions might as well have made none and is unlikely to achieve success, we believe that more can be achieved by focusing on what matters most.

Our approach to systems change seeks to influence one aspect of the system that is critical to its core purpose and has the potential to catalytically influence other parts of the system. Just like exercise can help a person deal with diabetes, hypertension, obesity, high cholesterol, coronary heart disease, low energy, weak muscles and poor mental health, we seek to find similar critical levers in global development systems. For example, in education, basic literacy skills not only help children read and do well in languages, they help children achieve the foundation skills and confidence they need for lifelong learning in all academic subjects and decoding work and life. Similarly, trained and motivated community health workers cannot only treat specific illnesses before they get worse, they can help promote awareness and practices that help prevent illnesses in the first place and promote healthy community norms.

In short, we seek to identify and invest in the one key change to the system that is meaningful in itself and can serve as a fulcrum for inspiring broader transformation within that same system and/or others like it elsewhere.

In their approach, our Program Partners seek to intervene at scale. Scaled impact is achieved by working on the key levers of systems or platforms that already operate at scale or are scalable. This is not the same as developing a successful pilot in a laboratory and then seeking to find partners to replicate it or “scale up” the successful pilot bit by bit. In our view this latter approach often fails because it is very difficult to replicate the leadership, resources, and quality assurance that were essential to success at a small scale. For example, one can achieve excellent results for some time by having a highly qualified and motivated group of external
doctors conduct in-person training for the staff of a community health center to diagnose and treat complex medical diseases. But it will be impossible to scale up this conventional in-person model to train 50,000 community clinics.

3. **Systems change depends upon strategic leadership**

We believe that leadership matters and is essential to identifying opportunities, articulating a vision and strategy, assembling the critical team and partnerships to achieve success, and motivating collective action.

Our Program Partners provide the strategic leadership that ambitious systems change initiatives require. They:

- Cut through noise and inertia to focus on what matters most.
- Are purpose-driven and pragmatic; they know how to work with what they have.
- Have a solid track record, integrity, and strong ethical values.
- Have the capacity to work at a high level of scale and sophistication.
- Exemplify both credibility and legitimacy. They have deep roots in and strong relationships with people in the countries where they seek to make change. We seek to work with leaders and program partners who are based in and/or have strong roots in the global south. They put the goal above their and their organization’s self-interests.
- Are humble and curious; they recognize the complexity and uncertainty of their endeavor, and seek to continually test and refine their key hypotheses and thereby improve the impact and effectiveness of their work, while still moving forward and not being paralyzed by indecision.
- Promote equity in all that they do. Women and disadvantaged groups are represented in leadership and senior positions.

4. **Complex systems change initiatives require learning and adaptation**

We believe that learning and adaptation are critical to success when addressing complex systems change problems. It doesn’t matter how smart and how well prepared one is – faithfully following a blueprint does not work because things are complex and do not go according to plan.

Rather, we support organizations who are willing to test, refine, retest, and adapt their theories of change over time. We believe that this type of learning depends on humility, curiosity and a “beginner’s mind” among partners who have the courage to ask, “how will we know if our theory of change is not working”?

This deep commitment to learning must begin with an organization’s executive, but must not end there, or be siloed in a “learning department.” Rather, tools and practices that elicit feedback, draw from the data, and adapt must permeate the organization.

Each organization designs its own systems for gathering data and information based on its particular needs, culture, and priorities for learning and continuous improvement. But our experience suggests that, as one part of these systems, successful organizations tend to incorporate feedback processes that allow them to systematically listen directly to the people they ultimately want to serve, and in particular, the women and other groups who tend to be excluded from power and influence. We believe that feedback from the communities who the work is most intended to benefit helps to keep the work focused, informed and accountable to its stated goals. Robust feedback systems like these can also help build a sense of ownership among communities and catalyze a constituency that can help sustain progress over time.

5. **Our approach requires a minimally enabling political and institutional environment**

People with the greatest need for health, education and economic opportunity often live in countries with difficult political and institutional systems and serious governance challenges. To be successful, our program partners will need to continually assess the constraints, opportunities and risks posed by these institutional
realities, and craft pathways of action that are politically astute and flexible. A critical feature of our ongoing conversation with partners is to understand how they are interpreting and responding to governance concerns. These risky environments also mean that progress will rarely follow a straight line, and that setbacks will be common.

That said, Co-Impact’s approach cannot work well in every context. Our reliance on civil society leadership, commitment to learning using data and evidence, and emphasis on innovation and continual improvement require the presence of at least minimal civic and governance conditions. These include respect for basic rule of law; the freedom to organize, associate and expression; a commitment to effective public financial management; and basic transparency and accountability. Many organizations have developed measures to track these aspects; we rely on several of these indices to delineate the countries in which we work.

These minimal conditions should be more robust within the specific institutional context that the systems change initiative targets. For example, we also look for demand for change from within the institutions themselves – usually from reform-minded government officials working in partnership with others. Similarly, while we cannot expect that the tough places where we work will be corruption free, our partners driving the systems change effort need to have the highest levels of integrity.

Across the contexts where we work, we examine the ways that women and other excluded groups can participate in a systems change initiative, and how an initiative will affect gender dynamics and inclusion. We believe that meaningful systems change is not possible when women and excluded groups cannot exercise agency, and therefore we do not invest in partners or political and institutional contexts where this is not possible.

6. Systems change requires a winning coalition of key actors

No single organization, no matter how large and powerful, can achieve the kind of ambitious systems change goals we seek. Rather, we believe that an idea requires collaboration among a range of organizations, people, and institutions if it is to take hold and gain traction.

This “winning coalition” need not include everyone. And it does not mean that every key stakeholder is engaged in the same way, or even formally working together. But it should reflect a solid political economy analysis of the diversity of actors, including women and excluded groups, who are needed in order to advance the idea and sustain reform in the midst of the real-world power dynamics of the systems we wish to change. For example, civil society groups often help to model ideas, press for scale and ensure accountability; media can help bring attention to an idea and its promise; technologists can help accelerate change; faith groups can give normative power to an idea, donors can bring much-needed resources, and the private sector can incorporate market-based solutions.

Most importantly, government partners, from within a system itself, almost always feature in a “winning coalition.” Often, these partners are reformers who see the opportunity for change within the system, but do not have the power, resources, or expertise to advance it. These internal government champions are critical to success and provide an “authorizing environment” for other staff to advance an idea. It is these staff – often mid-level civil service implementers – who often do the tough work of operationalizing the change at scale.

Given our focus on public goods, government naturally plays the most crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of the change. But the diversity of the “winning coalition” also plays a critical role. We know that governments, organizations and their leaders change over time. A diverse “winning coalition” helps ensure that an initiative can sustain its momentum despite the inevitable shifts in power and priorities.
Building a winning coalition is no small task. We seek to support our Program Partners as they work to recruit and attract the institutions and organizations who are best suited to advance change in its political context.

7. Systems change requires working on ideas and shifting norms

Successfully changing a system in one place can lead to large scale improvements there; but not just through mechanical replication of a successful intervention. For true and enduring change at scale, it is about an idea and transformation that changes the notion of what is possible, shifts norms and mental models, raises aspirations, and sparks further innovations. These broader changes rarely happen automatically or on its own – they require investments in curators, validators and purveyors of ideas, norms, and mental models in the ecosystem. These may include people who can write and tell the stories of failure and success, credible researchers who can vouch for the validity of the story, a web of opinion makers who continually promote a new norm, and a set of generous practitioners who are open with their time and experience to help others borrow, riff and adapt. Getting this aspect to fly requires attention and priority too.