

## Systems change evaluation methodology development – Draft for co-creation

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### Background to this document:

We convened a Webinar in early April regarding the possibility of co-creating a systems change evaluation methodology, as part of the [Skoll World Forum's Virtual Edition](#). Close to 500 people signed up for the Webinar, 300 people attended and 30 people signed up to be part of the co-creation process. We have also met other individuals and organisations in our work who are also interested to be part of the process. This document presents our initial thinking on the methodology, based on what we've heard and learnt. We look forward to your feedback.

### 1) Rationale

The rationale of developing a methodology for systems change evaluation is two-fold:

#### Increasing interest in systems change

A lot has been written on why we need more systems change, such as NPC (2015), Ashoka and McKinsey (2020). The increasing interest in systems change has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has shown the complexities of systems and our interconnected nature. This is the perfect time to convene stakeholders to consider how to measure systems change, so we can learn from what works and rapidly build the evidence base.

#### Increasing the accessibility of systems change evaluation

There have been some attempts, though only a few, at measuring systems change –as systems change is vast and non-linear, measuring may seem difficult. Some existing evaluation methodologies, such as process tracing and outcomes mapping, have been cited as more effective than others in measuring systems change. But practitioners are still grappling with the complexity of measuring systems change. This methodology consultation aims to bring together different concepts on this topic, and increases the accessibility of the theory and practice to a wider range of stakeholders.

#### Question for co-creators:

- 1) What do you think of the above rationale?
- 2) Any other rationale that should be considered?
- 3) Is the need for systems change evaluation really there?

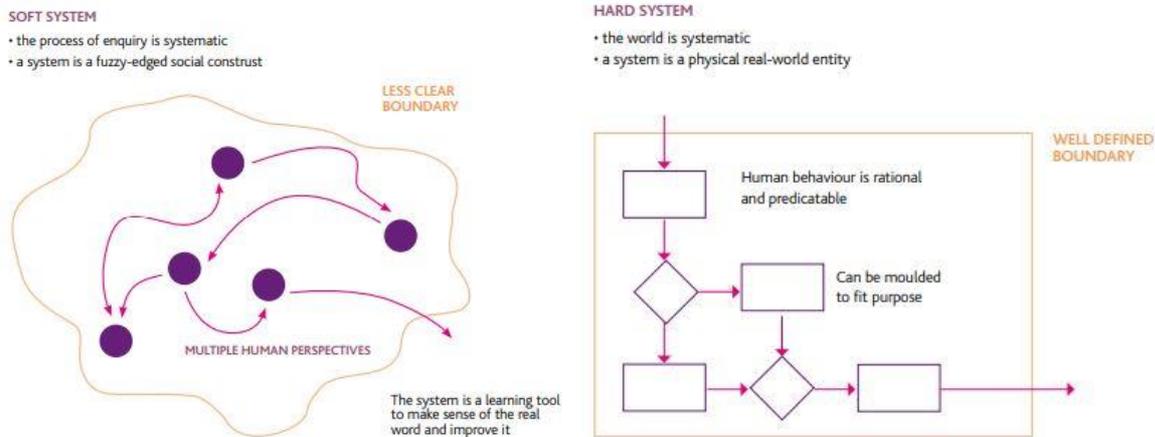
### 2) Definitions

Here we wish to define the main concepts involved in this subject, but the definition of definitions means that it is necessarily reductive and linear, and they will not capture the dynamic nature of these concepts.

#### *What is a system?*

“Complex systems are a configuration of interacting, interdependent parts, connected through a web of relationships, that represent a whole greater than the sum of the parts ([Holland, 2000](#))”

“Complex systems exhibit behaviors like self-organisation, non-linearity, feedback loops, self-organization and emergence (Pratt, 2019)”

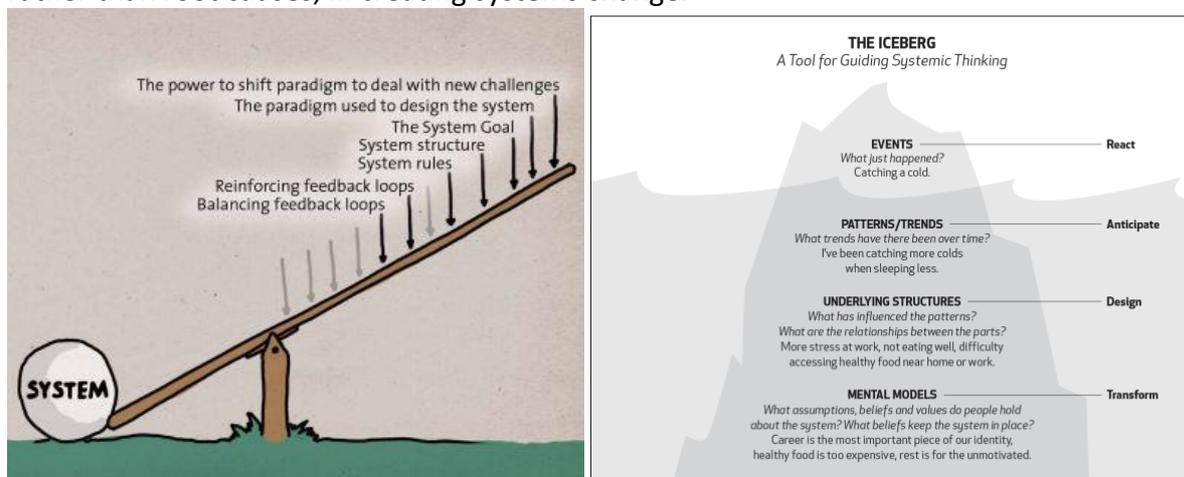


*What is systems change?*

“Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way.” (FSG, 2015)

“Solving these problems [humanity’s most pressing problems] requires long-term support that goes beyond activity-based funding and approaches that tackle the root cause – i.e., approaches that aim to change systems.” (Ashoka, 2020)

Systems change is a complex and debated concept – existing literature in the social impact space on this topic takes the view of tackling root causes; though outside of this space, systems thinkers, especially from the engineering discipline (Yuniarto, 2012; National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2018) are moving away from Root Cause Analysis as it is seen as reductive. Instead they are drawing from systems dynamics, an approach to understanding the nonlinear behaviour of complex systems over time using stocks, flows, internal feedback loops, table functions and time delays (influenced by Jay Forrester and Donella Meadows). The latter looks more at the concept of leverage points rather than root causes, in creating systems change.



*How are systems change and systems thinking linked?*

Systems thinking provides the foundation for conceptualising systems change, which describes the process of a system changing (either intentionally or unintentionally). In the context of social change, often systems change denote the intentional efforts by changemakers to change a system in order to address complex social and environmental challenges.

Question for co-creators:

- 1) What do you think about the above definitions?
- 2) Any other definitions that should be considered?

### 3) Considerations for the methodology

Based on the rationale and the theoretical underpinnings, when developing the methodology, we are mindful that the methodology may be too reductionist but we want the methodology to fulfil the following:

- User-friendly: Can the methodology be relatively easy to use while embracing the complexity of systems change?
- Flexible to implement: Can the methodology allow for different types of evaluation to take place, depending on budgets and timeframe available, and other operational constraints?
- Rigorous: Can the methodology still maintain evaluation quality standards ([Bond Evidence Principles, 2018](#)), such as triangulation of data, mixed methods, baseline data, etc?

We are also considering how the methodology can contribute to other progressive evaluation agendas, such as indigeneous evaluation, developmental evaluation, participatory evaluation, empowerment evaluation, feminist evaluation, etc.

Question for co-creators:

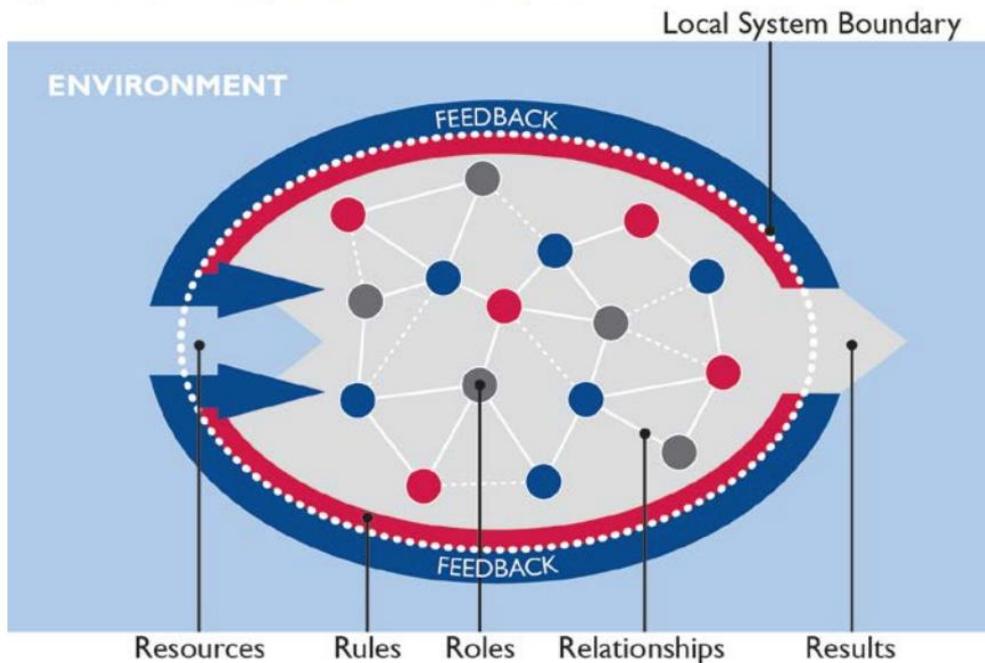
- 1) What do you think about the above considerations?
- 2) Any other considerations, from practical, methodological and theoretical perspectives?

### 4) Proposed methodology

Having reviewed many frameworks in systems change we have shortlisted the 5Rs framework to be the starting point, however noting that it comes from [USAID](#) (first published in 2014) which may be controversial. The 5Rs framework was shortlisted primarily because of its user-friendly nature, that it is easy to remember what the different elements represent; and its relevance to the context of social change. However we recognise that this may be controversial and we are open to other frameworks.

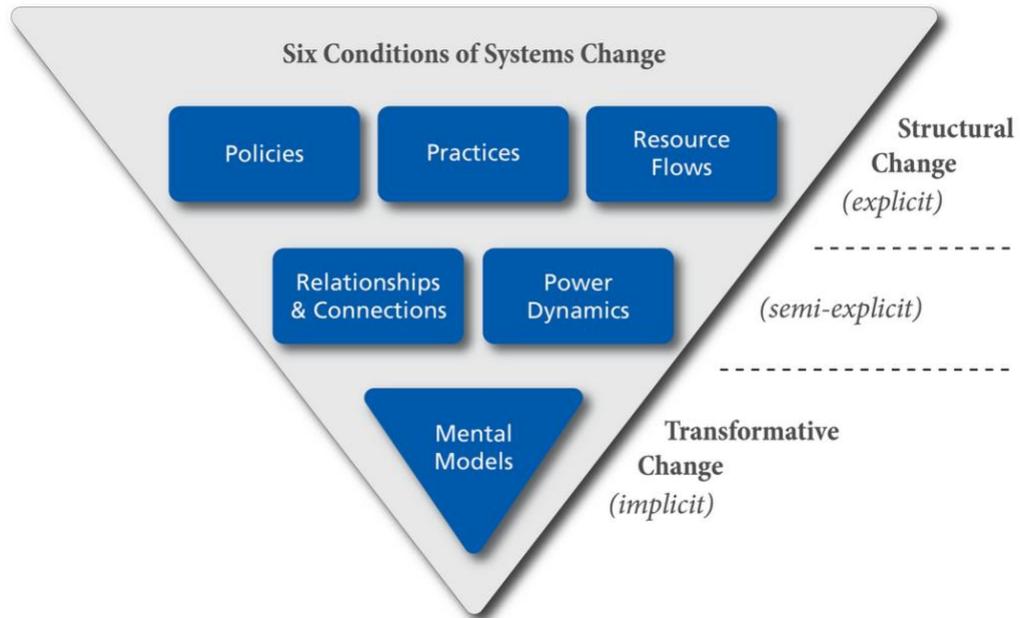
From USAID, they define the 5Rs as resources, roles, relationships, rules and results:

**Figure 2.** The 5Rs: Key Elements of a Local System.



- **Resources:** Local systems transform resources—such as budgetary allocations or raw materials or inputs—into outputs.
- Roles:** Most local systems involve a number of actors who take on various defined roles: producer, consumer, funder and advocate.
- Relationships:** In a similar fashion, the interactions between the actors in a local system establish various types of relationships. Some may be commercial; others more administrative and hierarchical.
- **Rules:** An important feature of local systems is the set of rules that govern them. These rules define or assign roles, determine the nature of relationships between actors and establish the terms of access to the resources on which the system depends.
- **Results:** The concept of “results” is expanded to include measures of the overall strength of the local system as well as traditional outputs and outcomes. Applying this framework helps identify strengths and weaknesses in existing local systems and provides a guide to systems-strengthening interventions.

Instead of the 5Rs framework, we are also looking at the six conditions of systems change framework:



(from [FSG](#))

Or group model building, which does not prescribe a particular systems change framework but rather, it is a participatory approach that is widely used to build the capacity of practitioners to think in a systems way.

Adapting this to the context of evaluation, here is the description of our tentative methodology:

#### *Planning*

- Use the 5Rs framework, or other systems change frameworks, to define the elements of the system;
- Identify leverage points that the changemaker / funder are addressing;
- Incorporate / transform the leverage points into the Theory of Change model (or an adapted version of Theory of Change model which has been criticised as too linear);
- Consider establishing baseline measures for the current system;
- Brainstorm impact metrics based on leverage points;
- Brainstorm overarching learning questions for the whole system;
- Consider how other factors in the system may impact our activities and intended change, and if possible, consider ways to measure them;
- Consider research methods appropriate to capture the impact metrics and learning questions.

#### *Evaluation*

- This stage depends on the methods being used and we are still thinking whether there are particular methods most suited within a systems change context. Such as, Social Network analysis, participatory research methods.

#### *Analysis*

- This stage also depends on the methods being used, but a particular challenge we are considering is whether it would be difficult to prove attribution.
- We are exploring contribution analysis as a method and its applicability to systems change evaluation.

A question we are still thinking is the relationship between systems change evaluation and developmental evaluation, agile evaluation, as well as other evaluation approaches. This is the very beginning of a draft, and we are looking to co-create with concrete examples to put this methodology to practice, and adapt it based on practice. The final methodology will be much more detailed than this.

**Question for co-creators:**

**1) What do you think about the tentative methodology?**

**2) Any we missing any crucial steps in evaluation?**

*Bio of author:*

*Bonnie has been with The Social Investment Consultancy since 2014 and as Managing Director, she leads the firm's impact evaluation work and thought leadership. She has a wealth of experience in impact measurement, having led evaluation projects for clients such as British Council, the National Lottery Community Fund and Tactical Technology Collective. Currently she is leading a data science initiative for humanitarian aid in Yemen partnering with Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation, funded by the Humanitarian Grand Challenge.*

*She is experienced in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, having been trained in Social Return on Investment (SROI), Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP) and data science. Bonnie has a Masters in International Relations at the London School of Economics, and a Bachelor of Business Administration with First Honours from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her Master dissertation focused on digital activism of Islamic feminism using social media research methods.*

*She is an avid advocate of participatory research, user voices and downward accountability, having founded an award-winning social enterprise, Lensational, which trains marginalised women and girls in 23 countries photography and storytelling. She also has strong thematic expertise in gender equality and diversity and inclusion, serving as Senior Contributor on Forbes and a member of the Expert Review Committee of World Benchmarking Alliance's Gender Benchmark.*