SYSTEMS THINKING

An Introduction

The following slides are excerpts from the Systems Thinking PH Facilitator Guide. For the full content, please visit: https://www.youthyearsph.org/systems-thinking

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Everything is connected to everything else.

Ang lahat ng bagay ay magkaugnay.

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We live in a world full of systems — inside us and around us.

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Systems Thinking

helps us to recognize and understand this world of systems that we live in.

It also helps us if we want to try to shift these systems and solve problems.

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What is a system?

- A system has a set of different parts (sometimes called elements).
- These parts interact with each other (relationships) according to certain rules.
- These interactions lead to events or results.
Your family as a system

- Who are the members? (parts)
- What roles do you play? (relationships)
- What are the rules?
- What are your patterns of behavior? (results)

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Is there a problem in your community that does not seem to go away?

Systems-thinking helps us to look beyond the surface of the problem and see the hidden forces that are keeping it in place.
WHAT IS BENEATH THE SURFACE?

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What is beneath the surface?

Instead of reacting to a situation based only on what we can see, systems-thinking tells us to dig deeper.

You can have increasing impact as you address the deeper layers:

- What just happened?
- What has been happening over time?
- What forces are contributing to these patterns?
- What is causing these patterns?
- How does our thinking allow these situations to persist?
- What beliefs and assumptions keep the problem in place?
We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.

- Albert Einstein
The Mindset of a Systems Thinker

- Look beyond what is obvious and always ask “why” to find out the root causes
- Try to see the bigger picture & recognize interconnections
- Zoom in & Zoom out: try using different perspectives
- Work for the good of all always strive for inclusion and equity
- Collaborate with humility & empathy
- Find "leverage points" where small actions can cause big changes
- Keep learning & be open to new ideas
- Be prepared for uncertainty & failure

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This is not a linear process meant to be applied one step at a time across the duration of a project. Instead it is a continuous cycle that your team may repeat multiple times as you are implementing a project. You may even jump from one mode to another depending on your situation. For example, collaborating with a new partner could give you new insights that will change the way you would map the system. Or mapping the system could lead your org to shift or adjust the implementation of an existing project. Rather than conducting monitoring and evaluation only at the end of a project; we should be able to continuously learn and adapt our efforts to the changing system.
**Understand the System**

The first key phase of a systems-thinking process is about building a holistic understanding of the system that we are working in. This usually involves the following:

**Identifying the system**
that we want to focus on and deciding on the scope and scale that we want to work with. For example, are we trying to solve a problem at the barangay level or are we focusing on a city or national issue? This can also be called “setting the boundaries of a system.”

**Developing a vision**
of our end goal or the positive long-term change that we are trying to achieve. This is your guiding star for the work that you do.

**Mapping the system**
and identifying the different elements (these could be people, stakeholders, institutions, etc), the relationships between these elements, and the patterns of behavior and events that are the results of these relationships.

**Finding your place**
in the system and knowing your ‘leverage points’. As you create a map of your system, you will start to see the different problem points and areas of need. You won’t be able to solve all of them on your own. But if your team reflects on your strengths, weaknesses, and experiences, you can try to find the specific parts of the system where even a small amount of your effort could result in a much bigger impact. This is how you can reflect on what is the best role that your team can play in the system -- where and how can you have the most impact given your existing capacity and resources.

*Don’t forget!*  

Don’t forget to check your assumptions and biases which may affect how you understand a system. This is why it is important to bring together people with diverse points of view when you are mapping and to make sure that the different voices and perspectives of a community are represented.
In the previous stage, you were able to build a better understanding of the system and identify leverage points in the system. Now comes the time to design and implement your solutions or project in collaboration with other partners or stakeholders in the system. This will usually include:

**Building relationships and nurturing human connections.**

Organizations and movements are driven by people. Collaboration in real life boils down to our ability to nurture human connections. We have to be able to listen, practice empathy, and build trust. Collaboration requires humility and an openness to learning from others, especially when we have to work with people or groups whose perspectives or beliefs may be different from our own.

**Identifying shared goals.**

Most teams and organizations will say that they collaborate. But there is a crucial difference between trying to find partners who will help push forward your organization’s own agenda versus working together to create and implement a community’s shared vision. This is the challenge that many coalitions and collective action groups face.

**Designing and implementing an adaptive plan.**

Together with your trusted partners, you will design and implement your initiatives based on the strategic areas you identified during the mapping. One important point to remember is that the plans we create must be adaptive. This means that we know and expect that things in the system will change as we implement our plans. So we need to be prepared to shift our approaches if needed. It is impossible to predict all the potential scenarios during your planning and proposal-writing.
Imagine yourself as a traveler going on a long journey. You may start off with a map to guide you but if there are unexpected obstacles in your path or if you discover that the paths themselves have changed, you will need to find other ways to reach your destination. It no longer makes sense to blindly follow an out-of-date map.

Working within these dynamic and ever-changing human systems and communities means that we can no longer just design and implement a plan, we must be prepared to adapt our plans to the shifting perspectives and goals of the people involved.
Building a Systems Thinking Team

We will not be able to effectively work towards a systemic goal if we do not consciously build a systemic organization.

A systemic organization incentivizes its members to try new approaches and focuses on learning from failure rather than penalizing it.

Members are comfortable looking at a situation holistically and tackling multiple problems together rather than breaking it down into individual programs and separate teams.

Systemic organizations are able to see beyond their own organization’s programs and contribute towards a shared goal with other organizations.

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When working and thinking about systems, we can sometimes forget that we are trying to influence larger systems so that we can improve the lives of the people we serve and live with. We are not dealing with abstract concepts but with individual human lives, dreams, and struggles.

For this reason, many systemic organizations have chosen to make sure that part of their operations continue to be involved in serving the direct and immediate needs of their community so that their longer-term systemic work is built on empathy and an authentic and humble understanding of their communities’ experiences.
SALAMAT!

Download the full facilitator’s guide here:

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Let’s discuss & collab :)

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