

SYSTEMS

RESEARCH & EVALUATION

When used to make sense of the world and how it works, systems approaches illuminate options, opportunities, and threats otherwise invisible. The Global Knowledge Initiative helps people learn and apply a range of systems tools and methods to improve performance.

Defining a System

A "system" is a set of actors and interactions that form a coherent whole, perform a specific function, and have a boundary that sets it apart from the rest of the world. Systems are comprised of four main components:



Boundaries: Parameters and limits that distinguish what's inside the system from what's outside the system (e.g., national, regional, sectoral)



Actors: Formal and informal elements within a system (e.g., individuals, institutions)



Linkages: Simple and complex relationships and their consequences (e.g., public-private partnerships)



Enabling Environment: Interrelated conditions that impact actors & organizations within a specific boundary (e.g., infrastructure, policies, culture, history, geography)

What happens when we don't take a systems approach?

- Unintended consequences catch us off guard if we don't use reliable methods to examine how things may change if we act.
- Linear thinking (the opposite of taking a systems approach) is like considering only one play on a chess board – it assumes there's only one path forward, thus masking the many possible routes to success.
- Whether tackling climate change or Ebola, achieving long-term, sustainable impact is nearly impossible without taking whole systems into account.

How does systems thinking enable better decision making?

No single solution or actor is sufficient to address truly complex challenges, be they in water, agriculture, education, climate, etc. Systems tools help identify which actors to approach for collaboration. Beyond helping us identify needed partners, systems research and evaluation tools support decision making to:

- Enable users to consider unintended consequences and evaluate actual trade-offs between alternatives.
- Help decision-makers clarify how and why challenges persist.
- Reveal contextual factors that are often overlooked.
- Allow testing of ideas before, during, and after implementation, supporting an adaptive management approach.

How Does GKI Support Systems Research and Evaluation?

TRAINING: SYSTEMS 101 COURSE

GKI specializes in designing and facilitating trainings for organizations, teams, and networks. In our Systems 101 course, we guide participants through the theory and method of systems approaches. Trainings are customized for length and intensity and are case-based. Participants practice applying systems tools to areas of their own work so that they can experience how systems insights can improve design, implementation and evaluation.

TOOLSETS:

ASSESSING POTENTIAL FOR SYSTEMS IMPACT

When investing their time and resources, it is important for decision makers to remember that interventions and solutions do not offer value in isolation of context. GKI developed a systems evaluation toolkit that equips users to better understand the challenges in which they work and to uncover those solutions best poised for impact. These tools can be used either retrospectively or prospectively.

Benefits From Engaging With GKI on Systems

ASSESSMENT
OF ENABLERS
AND BARRIERS

INSIGHT INTO
INNOVATION
POTENTIAL

PRIORITIZED
CHALLENGES

DEFINED
STAKEHOLDER
GROUPS

DEEPER
UNDERSTANDING
OF CONTEXT

IMPROVED
DECISION
MAKING

CASE STUDY OF GKI'S TOOLS IN ACTION

Evaluating Supply Chains Using Systems Analysis

In 2015, GKI was selected as part of a consortium by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to offer insight and advice on how to better use systems research and analysis in program design and evaluation. In the consortium's first pilot of our systems tools, we are performing an evaluation of one of the agency's largest projects – a global healthcare commodity supply chain. GKI-constructed system diagrams guide an analysis of the influence and incentives of key system stakeholders and an assessment of system-wide enablers and barriers to efficient commodity supply. Our evaluation is helping to inform USAID on missed opportunities for efficiency along the supply chain, to identify key indicators to be tracked in future monitoring and evaluation efforts, and to highlight areas for improvement in future supply chain management projects.

INNOVATING THE FUTURE WITH GKI

Whether you are considering employing some of GKI's systems tools, seeking to learn more about ways to incorporate systems methods in your work, or are hoping to learn the skills and approaches underpinning systems research and analysis, we are here to help. Named one of the world's top 100 social innovations for the next century, GKI enthusiastically embraces opportunities to share our models and methods with others who are passionate about collaborative innovation and development.

Contact us by emailing GKI Chief Operating Officer, Sara Farley at sara@gkinitiative.org.