

Oct. 23, 2015

Making systems thinking real



John Chettleborough

All blogs

For development programmes to be effective they need to take into account shifting cultural, social and political contexts. The systems thinking approach is a way of doing this, explains John Chettleborough.

Ever thought what connects Buddhism, climate change, improved governance and a flexible approach to decision making? If so....read on.

Currently if you work in the international development sector it is difficult to escape from the term 'systems thinking'. It is talked about as an approach to thinking about and tackling complex development problems, an approach that offers opportunities for scale and sustainability and smart programme design. But for many the language of complexity and systems is unfamiliar, even frightening. Systems thinking is simply perceived as yet another 'new big idea', a fad promoted by so called 'experts', that will eventually be consigned to the international development recycling bin.

De-mystifying systems thinking

Today Oxfam GB have published an [Introduction to Systems Thinking](#), this [guide](#) and the accompanying [animation](#), have been produced to demystify what systems thinking is. We wish to take it out of the realm of academics, intellectuals and scientists and make it a real thing that practitioners in the field can understand and relate to. As a result you will find simple explanations in the guide, along with practical examples and links to other resources and sources of information. Rather than confound you with masses of detail, the guide is intended to set you off on a learning journey.

Take the old adage 'give a man a fish and he will eat for a day, teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime'. A systems thinking approach would force you to challenge the logic behind this seemingly obvious statement. It would encourage you to understand the role of factors that mitigate against the development of a fishery based livelihood such as climate change, pollution and over-fishing as well as the factors such as the expansion in the market for fish which might encourage such livelihoods. It would encourage you to look for underlying drivers which were leading to these conditions such as national and local governance and gender inequality.

Rocket science or real life?

The report may surprise you. It turns out that systems thinking is not actually rocket science. In fact you almost certainly apply systems thinking in your everyday life, where you have to engage with and respond to multiple economic, political and personal systems - you just don't call it that. And despite its name, it's not just a way of thinking, it's also a way of seeing things and a way of acting. It's about humility, about being prepared to be challenged and having an open mind. It's about working with others and playing a catalytic role in the evolution of ideas rather than pushing specific pre-set paradigms. **It's about experimentation and constant, ongoing learning and adaptation.**

Are we not already doing this?

There are many examples of Oxfam applying systems thinking to what it does - and you will see some of these illustrated in the report. Systems thinking has helped governance programmes in Tanzania experiment and adapt, has brought together stakeholders in the Tajikistan water sector in an effort to find innovative solutions, and has led to a radical change in how programmes are designed in Sri Lanka. So this report is certainly not suggesting that this is a new idea. However it is also true that **pressures such as linear planning, donor requirements and hierarchical relationships get in the way of systems thinking** and our work and ability to have transformational impact suffers as a result.

A way forward

The authors of this guide believe that a more systematic approach to the application of systems thinking across Oxfam will lead to improvements in programme design and implementation and ultimately will enable us to make a greater contribution to the goal of eradicating poverty. By putting the ideas in this report under a common banner we hope that new learning can be generated within Oxfam and an improved enabling environment for the application of systems thinking can be created. The report makes practical suggestions for what managers, advisers and programme staff can do to make this a reality.

Go on, have a look at the animation...and then dig deeper into the report. See where it takes you.

This blog was originally posted on the Oxfam website and is republished here with kind permission.

John Chettleborough is the Head of the Agricultural Markets and Enterprise Unit of the Economic Justice Team in Oxfam GB.