Strategies for changing the world

Developing non-profit strategies to achieve a population-level change in a complex world

A white paper

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"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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Vision: a commitment or a comfort

Many non-profit organizations have vision statements that imply a population- or societal-level change would have to occur for the vision to be realized. Examples include:

- Oxfam: "Oxfam's vision is a just world without poverty"
- National Autistic Society: "A society that works for autistic people"
- Age UK: "A society in which everyone can enjoy a long and fulfilled life"
- Save the Children: "A world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation"
- British Heart Foundation: "A world in which people do not die prematurely or suffer from cardiovascular disease"

All these visions are desirable and well intentioned, but only some of them are realizable – for a vision to be realizable it requires clarity and specificity. Oxfam has a clear definition of what it means by poverty: its programmes and campaigns are closely aligned to that definition and it regularly reports against it, along with related KPIs at global and population levels. It may not be easy, but its vision is theoretically realizable.

The National Autistic Society has a fluid internal understanding of what it means by "a society that works for autistic people" but the lack of clarity and objectivity leaves it open to interpretation and debate, difficult to measure progress in an objective way, and harder to align internally behind a clear, sharp purpose. Its vision is inherently less quantifiable and thus less able to drive, coordinate and evaluate actions that can bring it to fruition.

Age UK's vision is, from an objective perspective, inherently unrealizable. It is so broad that, to achieve it in practice would imply an end to childhood mortality, teenage suicide and absolute poverty to name but three; and none of those elements would fall within the purview of Age UK. In developing its strategy, Age UK's vision is less of a commitment and more a comforting touchstone: it guides neither focus nor scope, has little direct application and no practical chance of being achieved.

Vision realizability has deep implications for strategy development. A clear, realizable vision enables an organization to test objectively, whether and to what extent its activities, initiatives and indeed, its mission and structures, are likely to achieve its visionary purpose, and to engage in transformational thinking about the fundamentally different ways it could bring that vision about. Without it, the organization can only judge the effectiveness of its portfolio in terms of reach, impact and financial sustainability rather than their contribution to a higher aim. This is important as impact and purpose can be very different things.

The challenge of complexity

In 2007 the UK Government's Foresight Programme released the "Tackling Obesities: Future Choices" project report. The research underlying the report had been commissioned by the Department of Health (now Department of Health and Social Care) to answer the question: "How we can implement a sustainable response to obesity in the UK over the next 40 years."

The report concluded that, while at an individual level obesity was the result of eating more calories than the body used, the *societal trend towards obesity* was an "emergent" outcome of a complex system of over a hundred inter-related factors, ranging from global food production and local availability, to popular culture, individual psychology, personal biology, leisure amenities, workplace environments, and many more.

This means that an organization whose vision was an end to obesity and whose mission was to help individuals lose weight, could provide programmes for obese people in a community, helping hundreds of them lose thousands of kilos a year, yet simultaneously see its locale's overall obesity level continue to increase, inexorably driven by the complex system. Indeed, it could successfully grow its reach and impact every year, achieving all of its targets, while making no difference to the population-level trend.

This is not a theoretical example. Following the report, the Department for Health gave ownership of the challenge to Strategic Health Authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups. With little influence over most aspects of the system, unsurprisingly they prioritised intervention programmes for individuals, and obesity rates are still rising.

The Foresight Report *mapped over 100 individual factors that influence each other, positively and negatively, to create the complex and dynamic system whose emergent outcome is population-level obesity.*

The report also highlighted the small subset of factors that could be directly or indirectly influenced by central and local government agencies, were they to use that influence in a coordinated manner.
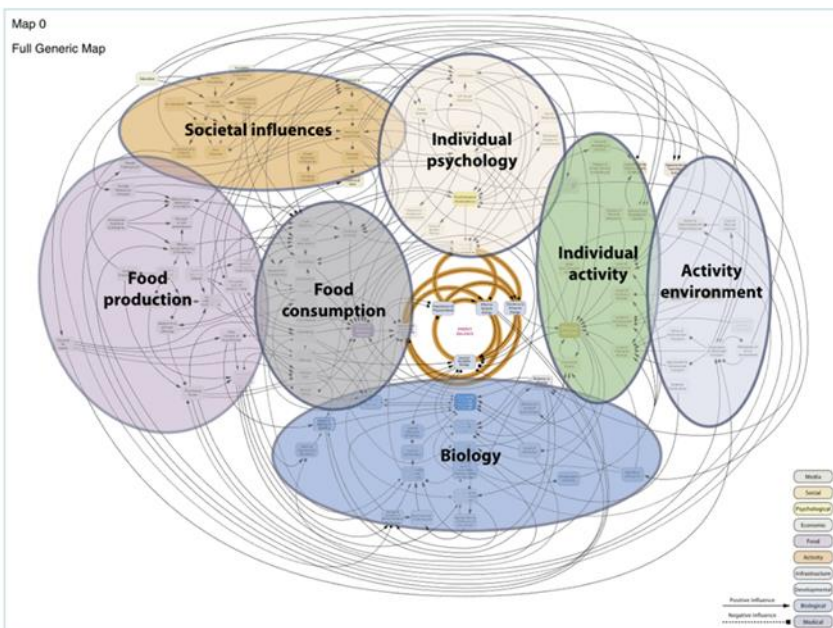
The limits of interventions

Obesity is not unique. Many of the social challenges that charities aim to address are the emergent outcomes of complex and dynamic systems. Autistic adults find it far more difficult to secure and retain employment, and there are various charities working in this space to help close the employment gap through interventions such as apprenticeships.

There are, however, over 700,000 autistic adults in the UK alone, around 600,000 of whom are not in full-time employment, a number which is increasing every year. Placing 20, 100, even 1,000 individuals into work would be enormously impactful for those individuals but would have little meaningful effect on the population, as other parts of the system (exclusion from school, bullying and low self-esteem, recruiter pre-conceptions, in-work environment and culture etc.) will continue to drive the disparity in the other direction.

It is unlikely to be viable, practically or financially, to realize the vision of "a society that works for autistic people" through an ever-growing reliance on individual interventions. Thus, a charity that is serious about realizing that vision must look at how it can instigate much more wide-reaching changes across the system because, without a system-wide approach, it is extremely unlikely that the prevailing outcomes of the system will change.

This shift requires the organization to move away from measuring its success primarily through its own direct reach and impact, and to look at ways it can create measurable change at a population-level, through indirect impact and action through others across multiple contributory factors. For example, to reduce school exclusions and bullying; change mainstream recruitment practices and prejudices; enable businesses to understand and build autism-friendly workplaces and cultures and so on.

Each of these changes will have many pre-requisites and each will be challenging to achieve. Many will require extensive collaboration, influencing and campaigns; some may require innovations, legislation, public attitude development; others will require professional marketing and the deployment of technical expertise to encourage and support different industries and stakeholder groups to change how they work. No organization can achieve these things at that scale by itself: system change is fundamentally dependent on partnerships, collaborations and extensive coalitions.

Thus, to begin a shift in strategy, from direct impact to systems change, it requires a population-level vision that is clear, measurable and realizable, against which strategic goals for population-level outcomes can be set and shared. It is these goals that then shape and direct an organization's collaborations and influencing, its portfolio of programmes and initiatives, and those of its partners, collaborators and stakeholders.

Understanding complex systems

The concept of complex systems has been studied for over a hundred years in the fields of economics (the Austrian school) and mathematics (chaos theory, self-organising systems, the study of neural networks and so forth), and in recent years it has been increasingly applied in the field of social sciences.

Typically, complex systems in this context are ones where:
- There are multiple, independent influences and actors
- They operate at global, national, local and individual levels
- Their inter-relationships are variable and dynamic (e.g. factors may have different levels of influence in different situations and at different life-stages)
- Because of this, complex systems exhibit an inherent unpredictability

A common trait of all complex systems is that they produce emergent outcomes, that is, they display properties and behaviours that cannot be directly attributed to individual components. Examples of emergent outcomes of complex systems range from a single stock-price on a market exchange, to the shape and structure of a termite mound. Experts can develop ways to influence the outcome, but it can never be entirely controlled.

Systems change: a collaborative learning process

The study of systems leadership (alternatively described as systems stewardship) is relatively new. In 2019 Harvard Kennedy Centre published one of the first widely accessible discussion papers on the topic, entitled "*Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development: Strategies for Achieving Systemic Change*".

The paper proposes three elements and ten steps for bringing about systems change.
The three elements are:

The ten-step system leadership journey, Harvard Kennedy Centre, 2019

- Complex system insight (understanding the system itself and the challenge)
- Coalition building and advocacy (aligning and mobilising communities of actors)
- Systems leadership (collaborative leadership skills to enable trust and learning)

1. **"No one is in control"** No single entity has authority over the entire system.

2. **"It's up to us"** Stakeholders recognize a collective responsibility to address the challenge themselves.

3. **"Everything is Connected"** Collective mapping and learning about the system generates new insights.

4. **"That's our North Star"** The group agrees on a shared goal or vision to guide and align their efforts.

5. **"To Go Far, Go Together"** Engaging and securing buy-in from a wide array of stakeholders is essential.

6. **"We'll find a way"** Challenges and setbacks can spur innovation and collaboration.

7. **"I can make a difference"** One person, organization or small group can have significant impact.

8. **"We need coordination"** As the initiative grows, a coordinating team or Secretariat is often needed.

9. **"Wow! Change is happening"** Demonstrating and celebrating progress helps maintain momentum.

10. **"We're in it together, for the long haul"** Reaffirming commitment and evolving to meet changing needs enables long-term success.

In the UK, Dr Toby Lowe, Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership and Management at Northumbria University is currently working with The Commissioning Academy to offer a framework for commissioners encompassing system stewardship as a key principle.

Lowe introduces the topic to commissioners by explaining: "*The outcomes we desire are emergent properties of complex systems, they cannot be delivered by individual organisations. The strategic role of commissioning is not to purchase services to deliver outcomes but to nurture the systems from which those outcomes emerge.*"

Lowe's framework similarly highlights three key elements of the system steward role:
- Creating a clear, shared objective
- Inspiring a collective will and multiple collaborations
- Learning [from experience] what influences the system towards the outcomes

The United Nations Millennium Goals and subsequent Sustainable Development Goals are the largest visible example of systems leadership in action, while a proliferation of place-based collaborations and trust-based commissioning initiatives represents the smaller end of the scale for current system-change programmes.

Required roles for systems change

The process of systems change encompasses two main aspects: the system itself, and the community of actors who collectively make up, or have the potential to influence, the system. Thus, in practice, the role of system leadership has a number of responsibilities:

- **Developing** an understanding or representation of the system itself
- **Defining** and engaging desired outcomes and targets for systems change
- **Convening** partners, creating coalitions and harnessing existing communities of actors who can or could play a part in systems change
- **Fostering** trust and openness, and engendering collaboration between participants
- **Coordinating** and connecting resources, expertise and practitioners
- **Reporting** and interpreting the impact of activities on system outcomes
- **Inspiring** others to join the effort and replicate successes

Arguably the main reason for the comparative success of the Millennium Development programme in relation to all the UN's previous undertakings since its *Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948, is the breadth of those system leadership responsibilities proactively taken on by the organisation since the programme's inception.

Charities whose visions implicitly require systems change need not necessarily become systems leaders. They do, however, need to identify and ensure that someone, somewhere, is adequately performing those responsibilities if their vision is to have any realistic chance of being realized. Nor do the elements of the leadership role necessarily need to all be encompassed by a single organization – as long as they are covered in an integrated manner with explicit accountabilities, their ownership can be distributed among participants.

Leadership alone, however, is not enough to create systems change. The community of collaborators, between them, also needs to perform a variety of roles, including:

- **Influencing** both within and without the collaboration
- **Technical** expertise sharing to support collaborators and external parties
- **Innovation** to develop new, scaleable solutions
- **Delivery** of new services either at scale or through the existing mainstream
- **Resources** and finance to enable, coordinate and evaluate all the above

It is for each organization to decide, in the context of each collaboration, which roles it is best suited to serve. A charity's vision represents the future that the organization wants to see, while its mission represents what the organization itself intends to do, in order to realize that vision. In this way, a mission statement should encapsulate the various roles within a system that the charity feels it is best suited and uniquely positioned to play.

The necessity of unachievable goals

System-change collaborations are slowly gaining attention as an operating model within the sector, but for most of the participants, these collaborations remain a small part of their operation – a footnote in the annual reach and impact report. Most remain primarily focused on their own interventions and their direct reach and impact measures.

This is understandable. We like to set achievable goals around the things we can control, that are not reliant on complex unproven ambitions in which we are one of many players. But as long as that's the case, resources will flow to interventions not to systems change.

Collaboration, particularly on a large scale, is difficult, time-consuming and expensive, and for most organizations, the concerted investment in money and people that's required, is hard to justify unless it is absolutely necessary. The critical step is to make it necessary.

For systems change to move from the periphery to the core of non-profit strategies, it requires those charities to set goals at a population level that the charity knows full well it can't achieve on its own; goals that create the immediate necessity for collaboration and innovation if they're to have a hope of being realized.

Several major charities are already in the process of taking that step. They include two major UK-based charities, both of whom are in the process of finalizing long-term strategies, predicated on population-level goals and a focus on building systems-change capabilities and culture.

British Red Cross is currently preparing the launch of its 2020 strategy which follows a similar path. In a speech by CEO Mike Adamson at the 2019 NPC conference, he outlined the arguments for a systems-based strategy and highlighted the leadership capabilities that they and others will need to develop within the sector to succeed. These are all pioneering moves, but ones that are prerequisite for the visions to which those organizations aspire.

References and further reading

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