

Philanthropy & Funding

Systems Change—Big or Small?

To tap the full potential of a systems change approach, we should not limit our thinking to large, transformational changes. We should also include smaller, more targeted changes.

By [Odin Mühlenbein](#) | Feb. 5, 2018

The idea of systems change is gaining momentum. The social sector is improving its tools and frameworks for systems change, and [Co-Impact](#) (https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_new_model_of_collaborative_philanthropy)'s recent announcement to invest \$500 million in systems change initiatives is set to spark serious interest in the donor community.

Ashoka, a global network of more than 3,500 social entrepreneurs, has always linked the notion of social entrepreneurship to systems change, so for us, this trend is very exciting. It is equally great news for all the other social entrepreneurs who want to achieve impact on a systems level, many of whom have been struggling to explain their approach to donors and partners.

There is, however, a misconception that could severely limit the potential of and interest in systems change: that, by definition, it needs to be big.

How big exactly it needs to be depends on whom you talk to. For some, anything smaller than the success of Wikipedia will not do. For others, systems change needs to benefit at least a couple of million people on at least a continental scale. A recent [report by the Schwab Foundation](#) (http://www3.weforum.org/docs/SchwabFoundation/WEF_Schwab_Foundation_Systems_Report_2017.pdf) uses a definition by Martin Fisher, co-founder and CEO of [KickStart International](#) (<http://kickstart.org/>), which goes like this: Systems change is "fundamentally, and on a large scale, changing the way a majority of relevant players solve a big social challenge, such that a critical mass of people affected by that problem substantially benefit." Examples of efforts at this scale include the Green Revolution, universal vaccine coverage, and free primary education.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with grand ambitions. They tap into our desire to contribute to something meaningful, express our values, and provide both guidance for strategy and common ground for collective action. Goals such as free primary education play a role in the systems change strategies we develop at Ashoka Globalizer, our accelerator program for advanced social entrepreneurs. We call these goals "big visions." But we have found that big visions by themselves are too generic to develop actionable strategies around. To address that problem, we break big visions down into several smaller goals we call "targeted systems" change. Here are some examples from the work we've supported at Ashoka:

- **The viscose supply chain uses recycled fabrics and straw as inputs, as opposed to trees.** **Canopy** (<http://canopyplanet.org/>), founded by Nicole Rycroft created a network of fashion brands committed to using eco-friendly viscose, and helps match viscose producers with technology providers to move from research and development to commercial production on the supply side.
- **Truckers across the United States discover and disrupt human trafficking networks.** **Truckers against Trafficking** (<http://www.truckersagainsttrafficking.org/>), founded by Kendis Paris, partners with every tier of the trucking industry, state agencies, and legislators to include anti-human trafficking trainings in their curricula, and mobilizes these players to collaborate with federal, state, and local law enforcement.
- **There is a market for low-priced health insurance products in Bangladesh.** **APON** (<http://www.apon-wellbeing.com/>), founded by Saif Rashid, runs shops for consumer staples in garment factories. With each purchase, customers earn points in a workplace benefit scheme that includes basic health insurance. APON is thus creating demand for low-priced insurance products. It also helps insurance providers design these products to match the needs of factory workers.
- **The rural water management system in Mexico has a feedback loop between program designers and local communities.** This helps ensure that water management programs are effective and efficient. **Cántaro Azul** (<http://www.cantaroazul.org/>), founded by Fermin Reygadas, implements pilot projects that leverage this interaction between designers and beneficiaries to improve access to clean water. It also builds cross-sector alliances, and advocates for convening program designers and communities.

The goals of networks like these should count as systems changes, for both practical and conceptual reasons.

Practical Reasons

On a practical level, the combination of targeted systems change and big vision seems motivating for social entrepreneurs. A big vision expresses core values and instills



Canopy is using alternative materials such as residual straw to make fabrics. (Photo courtesy of Canopy)

a sense of purpose, and a targeted systems change makes that vision actionable and to provides a sense of focus.

Another practical point is that it is much easier to develop strategies for targeted systems change than for big visions. Targeted systems change is more specific, smaller in scope, and often more closely related to ideas and networks that social entrepreneurs are already familiar with. Obviously, it's important to keep the bigger picture in mind. But the goal is to use a targeted systems change as the focal point for an impact strategy, combined with a clear rationale how that that change promotes the big vision. In the case of Cántaro Azul, for example, fostering the feedback loop between program designers and local communities in the rural water management system is likely to improve sustainability, accountability, efficiency, and ultimately the system's ability to learn and innovate. The targeted systems change thus contributes toward the big vision of ensuring that all Mexicans have access to clean water.

In many cases, we believe this approach is not only easier, but actually the only way to make progress against big visions. After all, how do you achieve free primary education or a circular economy without working your way up from targeted interventions? Larry Kramer made a similar point in his article "[Against 'Big Bets,'](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/against_big_bets)" (https://ssir.org/articles/entry/against_big_bets) "noting that the most promising way to promote systems-level change might not be to award large, eight-figure grants in the hope of fixing a complex problem quickly, but rather to support a number of smaller, synergistic interventions over a longer period of time.

Conceptual Reasons

On a conceptual level, targeted systems change is just as systemic as a big vision. They examine roles and relationships, rules and norms, flows of information, system borders, and mindsets. This kind of "systems thinking" informs which systemic goals we should set ourselves by helping us focus on the structures and dynamics that lead to social problems in the first place. This, in turn, allows us to look differently at social problems and ultimately become more effective with our initiatives, big or small. We include targeted systems change in our notion of systems change, because it stresses an important message: that a systemic approach is possible no matter what level of social change you are working on.

All of us need to work on big visions to tackle the challenges of the 21st century. But if we want to meet the full potential of a systems approach, we need to de-couple the notion of systems change from a specific level of ambition—and in particular from a level of ambition that is too grand to be useful in all contexts. The first step is to include targeted initiatives in our notion of systems change, both as valuable contributions in their own right and as the building blocks of our bigger visions.



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