



A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING SYSTEMS INITIATIVES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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September 2007

I. Background

This country has a long history of developing initiatives that aim to improve child, family, or community well-being by building or reforming health, education, and human service systems. These efforts include service integration initiatives, comprehensive community initiatives, and early childhood initiatives with broad child or family well-being goals.

Evaluating systems initiatives in ways that adequately capture their impact and inform their ongoing development is a significant challenge. Systems initiatives involve multiple programs and players and feature outcomes at multiple levels (individual, family, community, and state). They involve multiple public funding streams operated through a variety of different public agencies and decision-making structures. They require alignment of goals and coordination of actions across different programs and systems that may have very different political cultures. And either explicitly or implicitly, they usually emphasize equity and the importance of closing gaps in results based on race, income, culture, and language. Finally, they are long-term efforts, evolving over time in response to the political, economic, and social contexts around them.

This paper offers a framework to clarify ideas and approaches for evaluating systems initiatives. It draws on the theory of change literature and recognizes that:

Systems initiatives are not homogenous or static. They attempt to change different aspects of systems and focus on systems at different stages of development.

No one evaluation approach is sufficient or appropriate for all systems initiatives. Multiple evaluation approaches can be appropriate and useful, with different approaches “fitting” certain initiatives better than others.

Fundamental questions loom large in discussions about evaluating systems initiatives. These include whether experimental designs are appropriate or even possible in this context; under what conditions systems initiatives should be held accountable for demonstrating individual-level and systems-wide impacts for system beneficiaries; and whether the same evaluation methodologies can meet both the needs of funders and practitioners.

II. Defining a System

“A system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole.” A system’s overall purpose or goal is achieved through the actions and interactions of its components. A system’s characteristics include:

It contains numerous subsystems. Each component in a system is usually a “system within a system,” with its own set of interacting programs, policies, and strategies that meet certain beneficiary needs.

It is also part of a larger system. The system is an open system, meaning it interacts with other systems, has permeable boundaries, and is affected by its external environment.

Interconnections are essential for optimal results. A system has a goal or function that is best achieved when its components function together. More colloquially, with systems, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

It is a “loosely coupled” system. Health, education, or human service systems generally are loosely coupled, meaning that actions taken in one part of the system may have few direct or immediate consequences for other parts.

III. Defining Systems Initiatives: Five Focus Areas

Systems initiatives are organized efforts to improve a system and its impacts. They can be publicly or privately funded or a combination of the two. Systems initiatives may have different labels, such as systems building, systems change, or systems reform. Yet systems initiatives are best understood by their *focus* or by the areas of the system they are trying to improve. Specifically, a systems initiative might focus on one or more of these five areas.

Context—Improving the political environment that surrounds the system so it produces the policy and funding changes needed to create and sustain it.

Components—Establishing high-performing programs and services within the system that produce results for system beneficiaries.

Connections—Creating strong and effective linkages across system components that further improve results for system beneficiaries.

Infrastructure—Developing the ongoing supports systems need to function effectively and with quality.

Scale—Ensuring a comprehensive system is available to all intended beneficiaries to produce broad and inclusive results for system beneficiaries.

These five areas comprise the aspects of a system that, if developed or advanced, can produce broad impacts for the system's intended beneficiaries. Systems initiatives do not have to focus on all five areas, although most focus on several areas simultaneously. They do not, however, typically place an equal emphasis on all focus areas at once. Some areas receive more attention than others at any given point in time, depending on where the system's needs are greatest and the opportunities that are available.

IV. Developing Systems Initiative Theories of Change

Theories of change are now part of mainstream evaluation practice. They illustrate the pathways by which change is expected to occur and the role that initiatives play in producing that change. A well-constructed theory of change—one that makes explicit stakeholders' notions about the relationships between an initiative's strategies, interim outcomes, and long-term impacts, and produces testable assumptions regarding those relationships—is always useful, especially for complex initiatives where it can be difficult to understand the many strategies in play.

The figure on page 7 was developed to aid theory of change development for systems initiatives. It was constructed around the five focus areas, and for each area offers a broad description of initiative activities; a menu of possible outcomes of those activities; and what those outcomes, if achieved, are expected to produce in terms of impacts.

Actual theories of change should detail how initiative strategies will connect to and produce their intended outcomes and impacts. An initiative with multiple focus areas might have both a broad theory of change that includes outcomes and impacts *across* focus areas, and a more detailed version that breaks out and specifies the theories of change *within* each area.

V. Designing Systems Initiative Evaluations

All systems initiatives are not the same, and it follows that their evaluations should not be the same. Systems initiative evaluations should be tailored to their particular theories of change, assessing the outcomes and impacts connected to the parts of the system they are attempting to change.

The second figure on page 8 was developed to guide evaluation planning decisions for systems initiatives. It also is organized around the five focus areas and offers ideas about appropriate evaluation choices for initiatives that incorporate each. Each focus area features two evaluation questions that generally address:

- Did the initiative do what it said it would do (in that focus area)?
- Did the initiative produce the expected results (for that focus area)?

The figure also outlines possible evaluation methodologies to address those questions. Evaluation questions, designs, and methods can be “mixed and matched” as appropriate.

VI. Principles for Evaluating Systems Initiatives

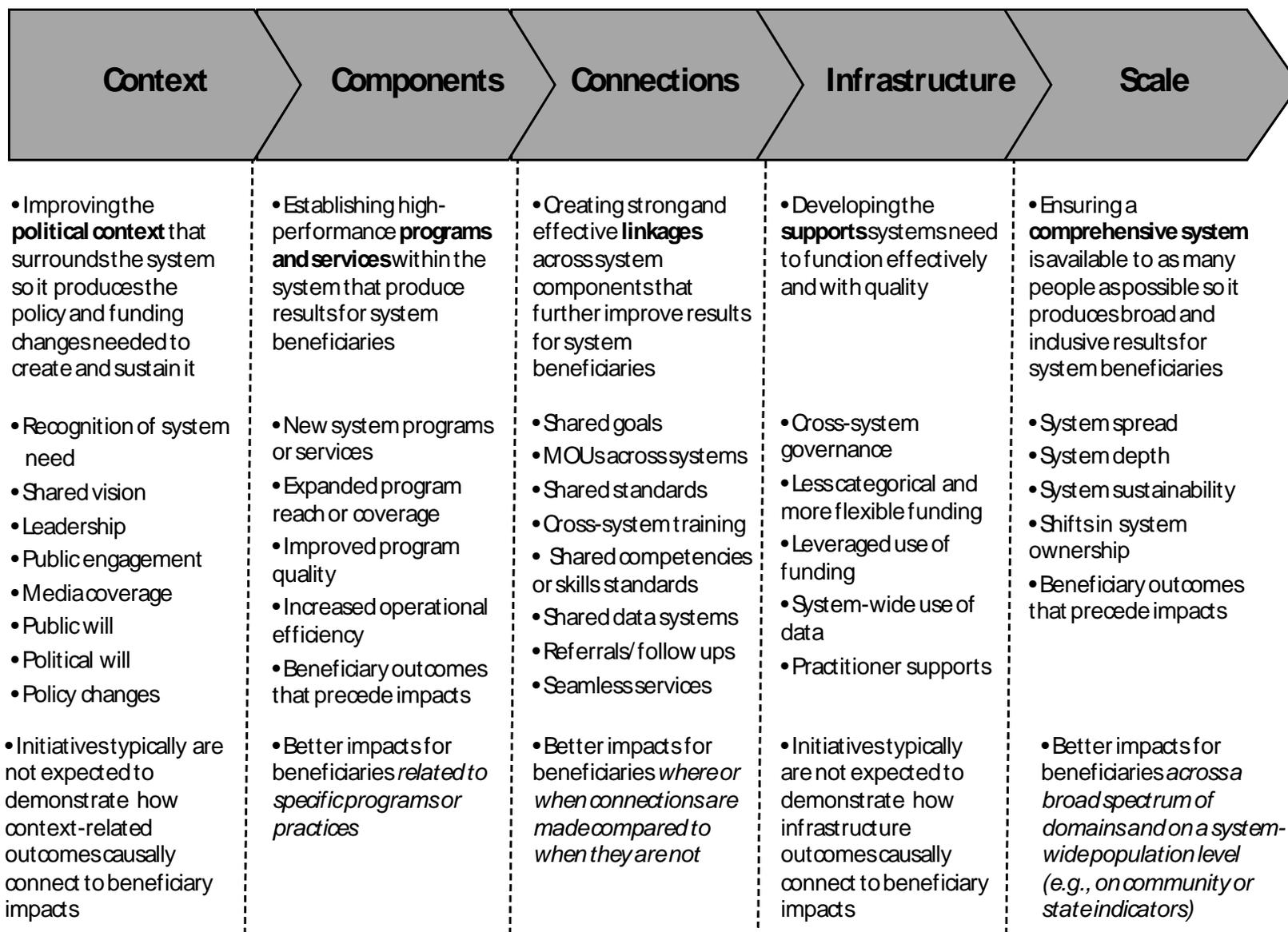
This paper concludes with a set of general principles about what constitutes good evaluation practice for systems initiatives. Some principles apply to evaluation practice generally and others are unique to systems efforts.

1. **Clarify the evaluation’s audiences and intended uses for the evaluation’s findings.** The evaluation’s primary audiences (or customers) and how they intend to use it should be established upfront (e.g., for accountability purposes and determining future funding or to identify lessons that can be fed back into the initiative for growth and adaptation).
2. **Base evaluation decisions on the initiative’s focus.** Evaluation decisions should be based on each initiative’s goals and what it is doing to reach them (as described in the theory of change).
3. **Use theories of change to facilitate systems initiative evaluations.** Theories of change should continue to be a cornerstone of system initiative evaluations, but they need to be constructed with rigor. They need to identify the initiative’s underlying assumptions and measurable ways to test them.
4. **Identify an appropriate level of methodological rigor.** Systems initiatives are evolutionary and adaptive. Consequently, this work may require evaluation approaches that can adapt along with the initiative and respond to changing circumstances, strategies, and opportunities. Rigor should be defined as clarity

about evaluation outcomes, methodology, and measures. Attributions of causality are dependent upon finding a valid counterfactual, but this does not necessarily mean having a control or comparison group.

5. **Factor investment levels for both systems initiatives and their evaluations into evaluation decisions.** Initiative funding directly affects the resources available for evaluation. Standards about rigor or the “level of evidence” evaluations are expected to produce should be considered in light of their funding, as evaluation resource levels greatly affect methodological choices.
6. **Establish the necessary timeframe for results.** Evaluation plans should be realistic and expectations about results aligned with the initiative’s theory of change, timeframe, and scope and depth. What data to expect and when (at least roughly) should be clear to the evaluation’s audience.
7. **Measure *and* value interim outcomes.** All systems initiatives have their eyes on the ultimate prize—better impacts for the system’s intended beneficiaries. As stated above, these results can take many years to achieve. It is important to identify outcomes that set the stage for longer-term impact, and to avoid assigning a lesser-class status to those outcomes.
8. **Hold some systems initiatives, but not all, accountable for demonstrating beneficiary impacts.** For some initiatives—namely those focused *primarily* on context or infrastructure—beneficiary impacts are far removed from the initiative’s actual work and accountability should be based more on the initiative’s effects on earlier outcomes in the change process. At the same time, initiatives need to be clear about how they link conceptually to ultimate impacts for beneficiaries.
9. **Be clear about the initiative’s role in addressing inequities and reducing disparities.** Most systems initiatives aim to address, in some measure, the profound achievement, health, wealth, occupation, justice system involvement, and basic opportunity gaps that exist in this country. For both planning and evaluation purposes it is important to be explicit about initiative goals in this area, even if the systems initiative is framed to benefit everyone.
10. **Account for and examine externalities.** Systems initiatives take place within and are affected by externalities—political, cultural, and other factors that are exogenous to systems initiative actions. Evaluations should take these externalities into account and factor them in when making generalizations.
11. **Make continuous feedback and learning a priority.** Evaluators should establish adequate feedback loops to ensure timely reporting of both formative and summative findings. Evaluators should ask evaluative questions, provide data-based feedback, and generally support emerging decision making.

A Theory of Change Menu for Systems Initiatives



An Evaluation Design Menu for Systems Initiatives

	Context	Components	Connections	Infrastructure	Scale
Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has the initiative changed the political environment through its activities? 2. Has the initiative produced changes to investment, policy, or practice that will enable changes in components, connections, infrastructure, or scale? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did the initiative design and implement system components as intended? 2. Did the components produce their intended impacts for beneficiaries? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did the initiative design and implement connections and linkages as intended? 2. Did the connections and linkages produce their intended impacts? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did the initiative establish infrastructure or supports that are consistent with its objectives? 2. Did the infrastructure or supports achieve their objectives for effectiveness, sustainability, and quality? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did the initiative enable system scale up with quality and fidelity? 2. Did scale up result in broad impacts for beneficiaries at a system-wide population level?
Methodologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory of change evaluation • Case studies • Public polling • Policy tracking • Key informant surveys • Coalition analysis • Policymaker/ bellwether interviews • Media tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program evaluation methodologies (including experimental/ quasi-experimental) • Program monitoring • Quality assessments • Efficiency analyses • Customer surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program evaluation methodologies (including experimental/ quasi-experimental) • System mapping • Network analysis • Customer surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory of change evaluation • Case studies • Performance audits • Management information systems • Practitioner data collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Population-based demographic and service analysis • Program evaluation methodologies (including experimental/ quasi-experimental) • System/ program monitoring • Results-based accountability