

## **Ayni – Communities of Systems Change: A Practical Application of Collaborative Systems Change**

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### **Abstract**

To address some of today's most pressing problems, we must organize differently. Transformational change now begs that we collaborate with others to make sense of our interconnected, complex problems and envision new solutions that might not be feasible if we act individually. Systems thinking is a framework that can help us understand complex problems. 'Ayni – Communities of Systems Change' is an initiative that convenes leaders of change to develop their system leadership and advance systemic changes in collaboration with others. The initiative is currently supporting 80 teams of social entrepreneurs and local government leaders on co-creating systems change solutions. As these teams apply systems thinking to specific problems in their cities, they also engage a broader group of actors to build solutions grounded in diverse perspectives and collective changemaking.

### **Introduction**

To address some of today's most pressing concerns, we need to organize differently. Transformational change now requires our collective collaboration with others to ensure the understanding of our interconnected, complex problems and envision new solutions that would otherwise not be feasible. Fortunately, there is growing awareness that we are all interconnected. Globalization, information, and communications technologies coupled with the speed of change make it easier than ever to see the direct and indirect impact of our actions on others.

Systems thinking is an existing framework that helps frame complex problems. The framework is used to analyze how a system works and how it relates to other systems. In the book *Fifth Discipline*, system scientist Peter Senge defines systems thinking as "a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems".

Ayni – Communities of Systems Change was created to help leaders develop systems thinking and advance systemic changes in collaboration with others. The initiative was founded in 2021 by Ashoka, the CoLab of Social Innovation – UC (CoLab), the Local Innovation Network (RIL), and Via Educación.

## **How We Frame Problems Matters**

CoCreative Consulting, an innovation and communication consultancy with 15 years of experience in the co-design of collaborative innovation, describes 5 levels of engagement: inform; consult; involve; collaborate; and co-create.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the problem that we tackle determines the type of collaboration that is best suited to address it.

For simple problems that have known solutions, informing stakeholders about the problem is usually enough to bring forward a solution. Complicated but solvable problems may require consulting or involving several actors who have complementary expertise or resources to develop a solution.

Unlike simple or complicated problems, complex problems such as climate change and gender equity do not have one optimal solution. To address them, leaders must come together to address potentially competing goals and views so that they can envision new solutions. Without optimal solutions, picking one to implement depends on what one values. However, arbitrary implementation of solutions can be avoided by arbitrating between diverse perspectives and conflicting opinions. In these cases, engagement at the co-creation level is essential.

Challenges arise when we frame complex problems as ‘simple’. Take, for example, unemployment for young women without access to education in underserved rural communities. Vocational training could be seen as a solution to unlock employment opportunities. However, empowering women could also indirectly shift local power dynamics and trigger a negative backlash from men if men believe that empowering women will undermine their role in the community.

Therefore, it is essential to understand problems within a broader context, or system, and engage stakeholders early on. How we define the boundary of a system has significant ramifications. Whom we engage decides who gets to voice their concerns, how we understand the problem, what expertise and resources we leverage for change, what capacity we have to respond to emergent problems, whether we can sustain our impact in the long-run, and more.

## **Girls and Women Empowerment in Ghana: An Illustrative Example**

To follow the example mentioned above, [Ashoka Fellow](#) and founder of Soronko Solutions Regina Honu found that providing ICT training for women and girls needs to be embedded in a broader, community change strategy. Her insight arose after conducting an impact assessment months after finishing a training program in a low-income urban community in Ghana. The report showed that the training did not result in significant changes. Moreover, there was negative backlash when some of the women became more assertive and spoke up more. As she explains, the prevailing mindset was that ‘girls need to be seen, not heard’.

Regina was not accounting for the multiple dynamics that impacted these women at the community-level. For example, to sustain changes, women and girls would need a supportive system. That, in turn, required that the community understood what an empowered girl is.

With that awareness, Regina and her team decided to approach and engage communities differently. Instead of offering ICT training, Regina decided to first open dialogue with community members to talk about their needs and challenges and how they could collectively solve them. As community members identified potential pathways for change, she identified areas where ICT could play a role. By framing a solution as an opportunity, she was able to show how technology could solve the community's needs. Through a co-creation process, community members then designed solutions where ICT training was identified as just a part of a holistic solution. Moreover, as community members owned the problem, they also came up with ideas and strategies to sustain solutions. For example, one group set up a community-owned Business Solutions Center that offered temporary employment for women and girls until they would find a job and used its profits to train more women in the community.

Regina also realized that she had to engage community leaders, in particular skeptics, early on. For example, she found that men were uncomfortable with the change because they were afraid that it would challenge family fabric, their role in the community, or their cultural identity. Regina used stories to transform this narrative and show them the value of empowering women and girls for themselves, their family, and community. As they embraced the change, they became champions of the process, enrolling many other leaders and unlocking new resources at the community level.

Regina's story shows that to address such complex issues in patriarchal and underserved communities, we need to:

- Realize that each of us only understands part of the problem and has part of the solution. This 'ability to see the larger system' is one of the core capabilities of system leaders according to Senge.<sup>ii</sup>
- Have the courage to let go of our own solutions, committing to the problem, and engaging those who experience the problem differently to create a shared understanding of the problem.
- Envision shared goals by integrating diverse, sometimes contrasting, perspectives and values, recognizing that each lived experience of the problem is important.
- Identify critical levers of change by 'co-sensing' the relevant elements and broader system(s) that impact our problem.
- Co-create and align critical change efforts under a collective strategy, ensuring that these efforts create compatible changes, with few unintended consequences, and that they permeate at multiple levels.
- Recognize that everyone has a role to play.

## **Ayni - Communities of Systems Change**

In 2020, [Ashoka](#), [CoLab](#), [RIL](#), and [Via Educación](#) explored how they could collectively advance transformational change in Latin America by drawing on their diverse experiences, networks of change leaders, and infrastructure. Through a series of reflections, they decided to create Ayni – Communities of Systems Change; a joint initiative that convenes and supports leaders to collaborate on advancing systemic changes. The initiative takes its name from a Quechua word that denotes reciprocity, solidarity, and mutualism.

The founding team noted the urgent need to support participatory processes where leaders, who do not typically collaborate, can come together to better understand the problems they care about and envision new solutions that may not be feasible to act on individually. For this, the Ayni team designed a 5-month program through which social entrepreneurs and local government leaders would work together in teams to address a pressing need in their city. During the program, these teams will apply systems thinking and engage a broader group of actors in a co-creation process to design a collective systems-change strategy roadmap.

The program is currently being rolled out with 80 teams of leaders from approximately 70 cities in Latin America under the umbrella of RIL’s Local Innovators Contest. Teams are addressing diverse needs such as waste collection, civic participation of marginalized or vulnerable groups, employment opportunities for women, local enterprise development, nutrition, youth entrepreneurship, and more.

The program is being supported by the IBM and [PES Latam](#). PES Latam is a global cross-sector alliance that has supported systems change initiatives in Latin America since 2014. A pilot with 20 teams from Africa, Southeast Europe, and Asia is also being implemented thanks to the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

## **Collaborative Systems Change: The Ayni Model**

### *Locus of Change*

Given that systems change collaborations represent a relatively new way of thinking and organizing for change for many leaders, the Ayni team chose the city level as the locus of change. The local level is a propitious space for leaders to learn and experiment given that:

- It is of a smaller scale and more predictable;
- Leaders have closer connections and experiences of the problems;
- Leaders can see results in a shorter amount of time;
- There may already exist relationships of trust that leaders can tap into. However, on the flipside, collaborations at the local level will be challenging when there is distrust or conflict among key constituents;

- A successful experience at the local level can serve as an example for replication at a bigger scale.

### *Forming the Teams*

By tapping into their complementary networks of leaders, the Ayni founding organizations invited social entrepreneurs and local government leaders to form teams around a common objective. These two constituencies have complementary attributes: local government leaders can bring solutions to scale and have great convening power, whereas social entrepreneurs have deep expertise stemming from a lifelong commitment to solving a problem. Social entrepreneurs also have the ability to sustain changes long-term, which a local government may not due to changes in political regime. Depending on the local context, one or both may have a trustworthy relationship with the people affected by the problem.

During the two-month application window to the program, the Ayni team facilitated conversations between social entrepreneurs and municipal leaders. These were those who were interested in forming a team, advising applicants on their engagement process, and holding two virtual workshops on how to create shared objectives. During the program, teams will form a broader community of system change at the local level by engaging other actors who are impacting or are being affected by the problem. This broader group of community members will participate through a co-creation process in scoping the problem and identifying levers of change as well as in co-designing and prototyping solutions. The engagement model is inspired and adapted after the [CoCreative's Innovation Network Structure framework](#).<sup>iii</sup>

### *The Systems Change Methodology*

The methodology draws on existing frameworks and tools from human-centered design, systems change, and collective impact.

The methodology guides teams through a process that follows the Double Diamond framework developed by the British Design Council. RIL successfully applied the framework to the design of public policies with its network of local governments in Argentina in 2017. It takes teams through an iterative process of divergence and convergence – hence the diamond shape – at two levels: the problem level and the solution level. In the Ayni model, teams spend significantly more time on understanding the problem than on creating the solutions.

Throughout the process, teams apply systems change tools and practice systems thinking, drawing from the collective experience of Ashoka, CoLab, and Via Educación on systems change. For example, to map the system and identify levers of change, teams apply the [USAID 5R framework](#)<sup>iv</sup> and carry out a territorial validation agenda. This includes secondary research about the problem, surveys of stakeholders, and interviews with experts and affected parties.

The systems change strategy roadmap is a critical element as teams move from the problem space to the solution space. To create the roadmap, teams agree on a desired systemic change, and then use a back-casting process through which they define and prioritize intermediate

objectives. The roadmap serves as a tool for the broader group of actors to see how they can each contribute towards achieving the desired change. Most importantly, the roadmap guides the solution ideation process later on, thus ensuring that actors direct and align solutions and future actions towards the agreed priority areas of intervention.

To develop participants as systems leaders, the Ayni team also created a Personal Journey Guide with meditation and journaling activities. This includes recommendations for each stage of the systems change design process. Teams also receive support from facilitators and mentors. Optional bonus track sessions on specific topics and weekly community meetings are organized.

## Principles

The following principles in Ayni's work may be relevant to organizations engaged in or supporting collaborative systems change efforts:

1. *Experiment at the local level:* The local level serves as a fertile space for leaders to develop and put their system leadership into practice.
2. *Understanding the problem is more important than designing the solution:* Spend enough time scoping the problem and identifying levers of change. The objective of a systems change collaboration is not to intervene at every possible level, but to channel collective efforts towards a few critical interventions that can nudge the system towards a desired state.
3. *Engage the government early on:* Governments can play a significant role in enabling change. It can also have great convening power. However, avoid putting the government at the center of the change process.
4. *Everyone has a role to play:* Systems change roadmaps can help actors see the role they can play and how each can contribute to the desired change. Actors can leverage their expertise and resources to rethink and align their activities towards the desired change.
5. *Focus on the whole, not the sum of the parts:* Direct and align efforts towards agreed priorities of intervention. Think of your role as a steward of change, not as a mere convener.
6. *Organize collaborations around shared objectives:* Common objectives can function as a self-organizing mechanism for forming systems change collaborations in an organic way.

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