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Systems Thinking in International Development

Engaging the Power of the Private Sector for Development
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Motivation: Systems Thinking and International Development

- The objective of International Development (in theory) is the sustainable improvement of the quality of life (QoL) of people worldwide.
- QoL is holistic. Health, food security, education, sustainable and resilient environment and communities, individual and social freedoms and economic prosperity are different aspects of a person's QoL.
- Providing each of these in isolation might not lead to a sustainable improvement in the QoL
- Yet most International Development activities are geared towards the elements rather than the whole
- Systems Thinking allows such a holistic perspective to be integrated into ID practice.

What is Systems Thinking?

- **Systems thinking** is a problem-solving process aiming to understand how different elements and dimensions within the problem space (system) influence one another to create the overall observed behavior.
- It's the combination of an integrative (instead of reductionist) mindset and methods, frameworks and tools to address complex problems more holistically.
- Systems Thinking doesn't negate reductionism, it provides a balancing force to ensure a problem is defined and addressed at a scale that is compatible with its level of complexity.

Key Concept 1: System

- A system is composed of parts that are connected directly or indirectly
- A system has a boundary, and the boundary is determined subjectively by those who want to address a problem pertaining to it.
- Systems can be nested within other systems.
- A system is bounded in time and space although all parts do not need to be co-located in space or time..
- Examples: Washington Metro as a system, but itself part of the larger DC metropolitan area transportation system, which in itself is part of the DC economy.

Key Concept 2: Complexity

- A system is complex, if its behavior cannot be directly predicted from the simple superposition of individual behaviors of its parts. The existence of human and social elements often indicate the existence of complexity.
- Different Types of Complexity
 - **Structural** (system size, number of parts, connectivity)
 - **Dynamic** (behavioral)
 - **Evaluative**

Key Concepts 3-5: Emergence, Delays, and Feedbacks

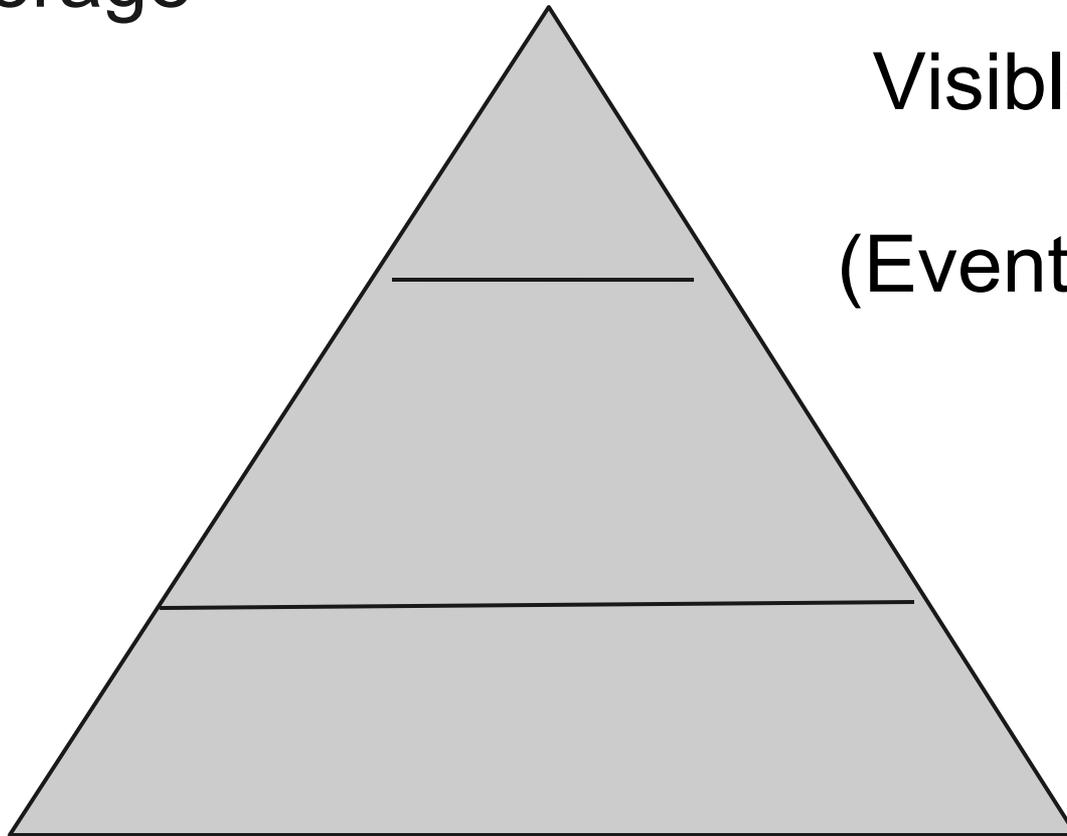
- **emergence** is the phenomenon of complex systems behavior arising from simple interactions of parts
- in contrast to Newton's third law (To **every action there** is always an **equal** and opposite reaction), many complex systems react to events with **delays**
- most complex systems have feedback loops, that is effects are often amplified or dampened. Often we see this as policy resistance.
- Examples: HIV/AIDS policy, air pollution program in Mexico City

Key Concept 6 and 7: Preferential Attachment and Tipping Points

- **Preferential attachment** refers to the phenomenon that resources generally attach themselves more readily to entities that already have those resources. (e.g. rich get richer, powerful attract more power, people with connections attract more connections). This is basically the strongest driver in the dynamics of inequality.
- **Tipping Points** are behavioral thresholds when a system changes from one stable state to another, often very rapidly and irreversibly. This is often associated with negative effects (climate change, epidemics etc.). However it could also hold for innovation, economic growth etc.

Key Concept 8-10: The Complexity Iceberg: Structure, Dynamics and Events/Symptoms

Less leverage



Visible aspect of
problem
(Event/Symptom)

Dynamics

Structures

More leverage

Interactive Discussion (For Second Part)

- What role does (or can) Systems Thinking play in leveraging the power of the private sector in development practice?
- What are some obstacles to integrating Systems Thinking into programming?
- How can we (as a group) overcome them?