



Key Takeaways from our Research and Consultations on What it Takes for Public Systems to Work Better for People September 2024

Introduction

JustSystems is about helping millions of people live better, more dignified lives. To care about people requires us to care about systems. Public systems largely determine how well people do by regulating access and opportunity in health, education, security, livelihoods, and community voice and freedoms that enable people to thrive. We focus on public systems because they have the legal mandate, staff, physical infrastructure, funds and reach that are vastly larger and likely to last much longer than what NGOs and funders can ever provide. By strengthening public systems, limited external resources can leverage a more powerful impact than if these funds were used in parallel projects outside the system.

Public systems are run by governments, and therefore government performance is central to achieving the wellbeing of people at the scale of the need and sustaining change over time. But how do governments become more just, i.e., more effective (at delivering outcomes), more inclusive (in who benefits and who decides), and more dignity affirming (of how people experience government)? What does it take to strengthen state capability and legitimacy, and foster system wide change. How can government-led systems become better at what they do?

To get answers to these questions, we undertook two connected exercises. First, we sought to map and learn from the contributions of 53 initiatives focused on strengthening state capability and/or fostering systems change. We reviewed their approaches, scope of work and success metrics, and effects on systems- and people-level outcomes. Second, we spoke with about 130 leaders, primarily from the Global South, in government, civil society, academia, think tanks and philanthropy. Most conversations were open-ended and unhurried of between 90 and 120 minutes, and sought to gain their insights on how public systems work and what it takes to effectively engage with government.

This draft note shares key takeaways from our research and consultations, in two parts. First, we distilled **seven key gaps** that hamper the ability of governments to make public systems work better for people. Second, we sketch **seven key mindsets and muscles** that need to be strengthened if we are to address these key gaps. For brevity, our observations are articulated as high-level summaries. Because we spoke with people from many countries, not all observations apply equally to all countries. Our proposal of what should be done in response is articulated in a separate note.

Key Gaps

We learned a great deal from our research and exploration. Across the diversity of views, we identified seven key gaps to advancing just and inclusive systems change:

1. **Most NGOs and philanthropy don't get what makes governments tick.** We heard that too many funders and NGOs just do not think sufficiently about how to engage government at different levels and in different institutions or get public systems to work. Although changing policy is only a first step along the journey of improved lives for people, it attracts the lion's share of attention among NGOs and funders who seem less prepared to support implementation, which is often the primary concern of government leaders. There is little curiosity and appreciation for what constrains and motivates politicians and public servants; limited mutual respect and empathy mean stereotypes abound; and tactics used to influence government often fail to have the desired effect. Specifically, many respondents observed that "naming and shaming" pressure tactics largely do not work at changing government practice, and may in fact increase cynicism about public systems, and about activism. At the same time formal accountability mechanisms, such as performance reviews, the role of supreme audit institutions, local councils and parliaments are often more performative than effective, and unable to curtail dereliction of duty nor outright corruption.

On the whole civil society and government stay in silos, focused on their locus of influence, paying little heed to what it takes to motivate other actors to contribute towards a shared goal. Such division reinforces mistrust and reduces the opportunity for cooperation and goal alignment which are essential for tackling complex social issues. These silos pervade within government and between sectors and actors. Civil society and government engage each other with practiced tropes and pro-forma interactions, with little sense of shared objectives and values.

2. **Politics is the most significant determinant of systems change, but CSOs and funders are disposed to shirk politics.** There is a widespread perception that electoral politics especially are built and driven by manipulation. But, both small p and big P politics matter for change. Small p is about understanding the political economy and levers of change, about who has the power and motivation to make decisions and move or stop things. Big P is about understanding political parties, what helps get votes and win elections, gain political legitimacy, and secure legacies. NGOs and philanthropy focus on generating and selling evidence and impactful, technically sound projects, but these fail to gain traction because they do not address political constraints and government priorities. Similarly, accountability is also weak because it takes little account for how power works in practice and can easily subvert formal contracts and official rules of the game.
3. **Inclusion is acknowledged but treated superficially.** While there is

widespread recognition about the need for inclusion, particularly of girls and women, in practice public decision-making and execution frequently fails to recognize and address underlying drivers of racial, gender and class-based discrimination. This is especially the case in relation to exercise of voice, agency and agenda-setting, and other less visible manifestations of power. We must move from measuring and addressing inclusion through presence to considering participation, agency, leadership. Moreover, inclusion is treated as a special case, reaching a small proportion of those affected, at times via specialized NGOs. This further marginalizes excluded populations and the work of inclusion from the center of public concern and fails to shift the systemic drivers that produce disadvantage in the first place. Even within government, frontline workers' perspectives and input are often sidelined, and they are maligned by their superiors and citizens alike.

4. **How people's lives are improving is not clear.** Systems change efforts often do not articulate their work in terms of meaningful and measurable changes in people's wellbeing or sense of dignity. The stories of success, alongside metrics and results, tend to focus on outputs and effects proximate to their work, rather than ultimate, meaningful improvements among people or planet. Government rules are designed to manage potential malfeasance, and staff are incentivized for *compliance* rather than problem solving and achieving outcomes. This sort of fear or anxiety based, compliance-driven accountability has the inadvertent effect of letting the public service off the hook for real results. Neither government reforms nor civil society interventions are sufficiently accountable for concrete improvements in people's lives.

A specific challenge that drives poor results and low accountability is **the lack of prioritization**. The world is full of thousands of problems and ideas, and people who advocate for action on them. Political incentives push leaders to respond to as many of these inputs as possible. But respondents noted that trying to do too much means achieving nothing well – and that for true progress leaders need to rally their constituents around a small set of priorities, and then focus organizational resources and measurement around these priorities. Here the pressure from well-meaning outsiders advocating specific policy or issue focus can unwittingly make things worse by adding to the “noise” that undermines focused action.

5. **Capacity is thought of as *individual skills not system relationships*:** Strengthening state capability efforts, including those initiated by governments themselves, support and measure capacity development and sharing best practice among individual government officials rather than the wider transformative effects across systems and institutional culture. For example, we learned about many instances of how evidence was used to inform policies by targeted leaders but observed fewer instances of how the normative culture and practice of institutions had evolved to make the use of evidence a matter of course. There is limited focus on how everyday system

level norms, incentives and practices are changing at scale and little support directed towards galvanizing ‘thinking bureaucracies’. Strengthening state capability requires going beyond building the individual skillsets to encompass what the state collectively – based on the mental models, relationships, incentives among its agents – is able to deliver. We should be working to enhance the way in which a public system’s components – formal and informal including finances, human resources, feedback loops and morale and relationships – can be aligned to deliver with dignity.

6. **We are reaching the limits of solving problems through logistical efficiency.**
A huge amount of human progress has come from solving the “logistics” of delivery – hiring and paying teachers, health workers and police; building classrooms, clinics, sanitation pipes, and electrical grids; supplying medicines and textbooks – and making these cost efficient. But many of the most pressing challenges today are more complex; *they require transforming human relationships and exercising imagination* – how can teachers be motivated to help children learn and gain confidence, or how we make choices today to ward off climate effects that hurt other geographies or future generations. Current norms, systems and relationships do not lend themselves to the more iterative, collaborative and systemic approaches that we need to solve these deeper problems. We need renewed focus on people, relationships and networks that help get things done; and horizontal and vertical collectives and collaboratives within government, across sectors, and with external organizations.
7. **The nature of funding and reporting undermines systems change.**
Philanthropic capital and political cycles are impatient and look for quick visible wins. Few actors are focused on supporting public systems change for the entire reform cycle through implementation and consolidation. Instead, philanthropy and NGOs firewall their interventions from the system to protect resources and reputations. This preference pulls them and their partners away from the realities of making change in public systems, and in so doing limits their scope and transformative potential.

Relatedly, the function of reporting is, in practice, largely about looking good, not being truthful or doing better. Both government and NGO staff are incentivized to show progress and impact by reporting good news. Reporting structures are designed to extract information and report it to top leaders and donors, rather than helping people learn and improve their work. The energy of reporting is often driven by anxiety and fear, because the next renewal of funding or even one’s position is seen to depend on looking good. These conditions not only make it difficult to have honest conversations and learn from failure or change, they also dampen creativity, risk-taking and initiative, all of which are essential to transformative change.

The implications are more profound than onerous alone. The start-stop nature of short-term projects and rosy reporting can make communities become distrustful and disillusioned – as information shared by government is

increasingly disconnected from their realities and interventions are designed based on administrative fiction. Across the board, respondents were clear that, to have any hope of success, transformation efforts need to have feedback from and accountability to constituents at the center.

Essential Mindsets and Muscles

How can we address these gaps to make the state more effective and inclusive? Many ideas and examples come to mind. But our respondents cautioned against jumping to solutions and fixes, nor to find a specific fix for each gap. Instead, they argued for *a shift in mindset and perspective*, and strengthening a particular set of *muscles* that better understand and address system dynamics and the people who run them. Seven major aspects were identified:

1. **Focus on state capability instead of pushing for specific innovations and policies.** Many funders and NGOs believe that the right evidence and policy will get us the impact we seek. But while evidence informed policy matters, we misdiagnose the core constraint in government. It's not the lack of good ideas, but the ability to sort through ideas, choose the ones that best fit the context at that time, and focus on good execution. Government leaders are constantly bombarded by hundreds of “sales pitches” that speak little to their everyday realities, and only create more noise and fatigue. No system can handle a torrent of new ideas, solutions, and policies however good they are; in fact constant pressure for change can fragment and undermine state coherence and capacity.

Instead of starting with our issue or project, we need to meet government where they are and understand their priorities. To deploy a posture of empathy, respect, and curiosity and ask how we can be helpful. We need to understand the system, its formal and informal dynamics, and the motivations and constraints of the people inside. That requires more listening and less advising, more understanding and less judgment, and true dialogue. This does not mean compromising on key principles but rather finding a way in which government priorities can be pursued in ways that better reflect purpose, principle and pragmatism. Put differently, rather than an offer of smart solutions initiated by outside well-wishers, what is more important is the ability of a bureaucracy to become motivated, and think, prioritize and solve for itself.

2. **Trust is the currency of change** more so than the evidence, credentials, public pressure, or funding. Leaders need allies and advisors they can count on and confide in, who will listen with an empathetic ear but also know how to speak the hard truth. Trust enables openness, vulnerability and risk taking, and helps convert commitment to action. In seeking to support and influence government, trusting relationships are the starting point and what sustains influence and action over time. This is true across the system, not only among top leadership.

Furthermore, several respondents observed that the centrality of trust in fostering agency and driving action should compel us to *reimagine accountability as relational rather than adversarial*. Rather than a “gotcha mindset” that threatens punishment (but rarely follows through), where the starting point is that government staff are likely to abuse their positions unless monitored, what would it look like to focus instead on their motivation, agency and responsibility? In this conception the starting point is that most people in government would like to do well, and the achievement of outcomes is even more central, but framed as a collective, shared goal between citizens and governments that can best be achieved through an environment of trust, mutual support and discretion.

3. **Put people and relationships at the center.** System change efforts need to center changes in people’s lives, with close attention to women and others who have been historically excluded. We need new approaches to measuring and describing results and progress that move beyond procedural compliance, proximate outcomes from the interventions and bean-counting.

Additionally, we need think carefully about and engage with the agency and motivation of frontline workers responsible for making the change come alive in practice – teachers, nurses, village, block and district officers – and their middle level managers. This includes exploring how to enable those at the frontlines to exercise greater influence of change efforts, with the rest of the system geared to support them and ensure performance and delivery

Governments naturally default into silos when most reform requires co-operation and collaboration across geographies and sectors. Support actors can encourage and facilitate cross-sectoral and institutional collaboration and help differently organized and incentivized government institutions come together around shared purpose.

4. **It takes unusual partnerships and coalitions.** Our increasingly polarized and authoritarian world makes the work of building understanding and relationships across differences even more important. Deep systemic changes cannot be done by any one actor alone, however powerful, and they can easily be undermined by key constituencies who are not on board. It takes a winning coalition of affected and influential actors to build sufficient support and sustain change. Things move when elites recognize that their long-term interests will be better met by coming together to advance social progress through a shared “development bargain”. And unusual collaborations can also lead to ways of reimaging models of government in ways that are more creative and participatory and can help restore public trust in government. Trusted and skilled intermediaries can play a key role in holding purpose driven, action-oriented, safe space. Such facilitators serve as a bridge, connecting different constituencies, perspectives, and interests and enabling them to

come together around a shared goal.

5. **Genuine opportunities to step back and reflect are key.** But many systems leaders operate in distracting environments that inhibit deep work. Governments and NGOs are incentivized by multiple everyday transactional demands – meetings, staying on top of inboxes, compliance and dealing with urgent but often not important matters. Virtually every leader we consulted spoke about the critical importance of stepping back from the fray; taking time to think, imagine and connect deeply; and to focus on purpose. Attention to wellbeing and personal practice are crucial for any leader seeking to steward transformative change. Instead of treating this as a private preference, we need to support conditions for leaders to be more reflective, and as a minimum not add to the noise.

Leaders need space and time to collectively and individually deliberate, to come together to build trust and connections, and to openly engage with new perspectives and ideas. But these opportunities are rare and the power of convenings and safe spaces to discuss and disagree are undervalued. Periodic retreats in safe, beautiful spaces with their teams or peers, when goal-focused, well organized, and skillfully facilitated, are seen as super valuable by most leaders.

6. **All the key elements come together in a compelling methodology.** We reviewed and spoke with a very wide array of people but, remarkably, almost all of them spoke (explicitly or implicitly) about the power of a clear *methodology – an approach that is focused on purpose*. The specific issues and approaches for public systems change vary across context, sector and moment, but what is common across these is a way of thinking, relating, being and doing – that needs to be encapsulated in the questions we ask and how we engage. A thoughtful deployment of methodology helps both government and civil society leaders clarify and built shared understanding about purpose and outcomes (what matters and what good looks like), and how to design, execute and continuously improve action towards that purpose. This focus on the right questions allows governments and NGOs to determine and own their agendas while strengthening clarity and accountability for all, much more effectively than if the priority issues are determined by funders or other external actors.
7. **The right kind of resourcing is essential for successful systems change.** Each year, public systems in the Global South spend hundreds of billions of dollars and philanthropy spends tens of billions more to augment that work. But these billions come with expectations, rules and procedures that make it very difficult to invest in the kind of perspective-taking and muscle building work described above. Government procurement and recruitment rules can be rigid and take long; similarly, NGOs rarely have the flexibility, trust and long term runway they need to pursue deep change. The funds needed for this thinking, adoption and improvement across the system are

comparatively miniscule – usually well below 1% of what public systems spend, and still very difficult to get. For example, we heard government leaders with a billion plus dollars and NGO leaders with \$20m+ budgets tell us how transformative it would be to have access to a few hundred thousand dollars of flexible capital. Staff of the relatively few funders who invest in this way told us that the alignment, trust and space their principals provided were essential to success.

Comments/feedback most welcome to info@justsystems.org