Interreg Baltic Sea Region

Co-funded by the European Union

RESPONSIVE PUBLIC SERVICES

RESIST

MEASURING SYSTEMS CHANGE IN SOCIAL INNOVATION

Train the trainers

The RESIST project is co-financed by the European Union (European Regional Development Fund) under the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme.

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What Is Systems Change?

A warm up question

Key elements

Non-linear approach

Non-linear: multiple actors, feedback loops, emergence

Shifts

Shifts in structures, relationships, power dynamics, mental models

Multi-level approach

Multi-level: individuals, organizations, policies, culture

Long-term vision

Long-term: transformation unfolds over 5-10 years

How it happens

New solutions

Social innovation creates new solutions to social problems

Shifts of fundamentals

Effective when it shifts underlying systems, not just symptoms

Metrics

Requires measuring relationships, narratives, and power shifts

Why Measuring Systems Change Matters

Root cause

Social innovation tackles root causes, not symptoms

Proper metrics

Traditional metrics miss transformation in relationships and power

Right focus

Systems change requires tracking emergence and contribution

The Systems Iceberg Model

Events: visible outcomes (what we see)

Patterns: trends over time (what repeats)

Structures: rules, policies, power (what shapes patterns)

Mental Models: beliefs, values, assumptions (what drives structures)

Social Innovation as Systems Change

Attribution vs contribution

What is the difference?

Attribution = proving direct cause

Contribution = showing role in broader change

Networks drive innovation → measure influence, not isolation

Instead of proving “we caused this,” contribution analysis asks, “How did we help make this possible?” In complex systems, multiple actors shape outcomes. Mapping influence is more realistic than seeking sole attribution.

Direct outcomes = immediate and measurable results of activities (e.g., services delivered, participants reached).

Ripple effects = secondary changes that move through wider networks, influencing policies, practices, and other actors beyond the direct scope

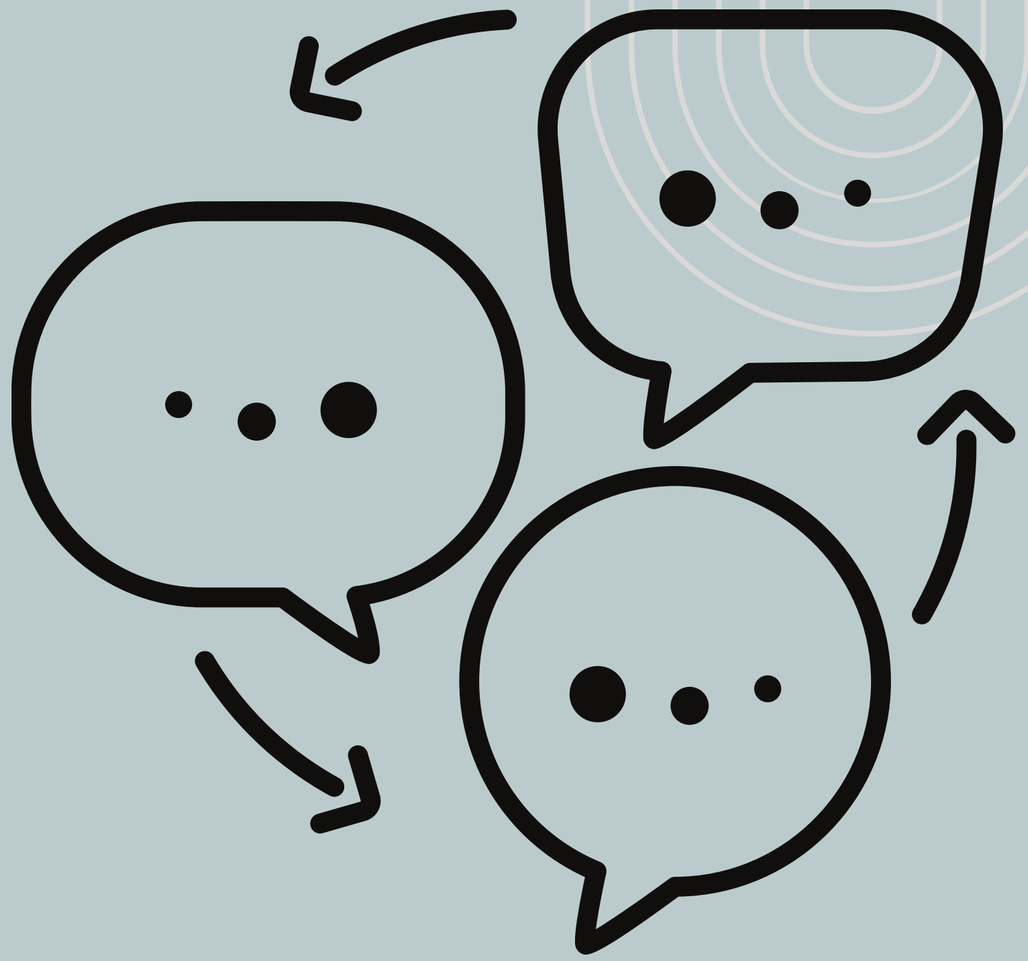
Emergent outcomes = surprising or unintended shifts that arise from interactions, feedback loops, and collaborations within the system

Understanding Ripple Effects

Understanding Ripple Effects

Like ripples expanding outward from a single drop in water, **the impacts of social innovation rarely stop with the immediate results.** Direct outcomes are the first layer of change, such as the number of people served or a new program launched. Ripple effects occur when those immediate changes influence connected actors, inspire replication, or shift local policies and practices.

Can you name example of the ripple effect?



Let's discuss!

Importance of relevant measurment

Limitations of conventional evaluation approaches:

- Short time horizons: pressure for results within 1–2 years
- Attribution bias: overemphasis on proving cause-effect
- Output obsession: focus on counting activities rather than outcomes
- Blind spots: failure to capture power dynamics, cultural shifts, or unintended consequences

Why traditional measurement falls short

Traditional monitoring and evaluation tools are not designed for the complexity of systems change. They assume change is linear, attributable to a single intervention, and measurable in the short term. Funders often request quick results, but systemic transformation requires a longer horizon — sometimes decades. Similarly, attempts to isolate impact to one organization ignore the collective and distributed nature of change. When evaluations prioritize outputs such as the number of workshops held or participants trained, they risk missing the deeper transformation happening in relationships, trust, and cultural narratives.

Measuring the health of systems requires indicators that look beyond single organizations:

- Network density, centrality, and diversity — how connected and inclusive the system is
- Levels of trust, reciprocity, and quality of collaboration
- Policy and practice changes that embed systemic improvements
- Narrative shifts in public discourse and media representation

Network & system health indicators

Systems are made up of relationships, not just individual actors. Measuring systemic health requires attention to the vibrancy and resilience of networks. Indicators such as density and centrality highlight how well actors are connected, while diversity shows whether different voices and perspectives are included. Beyond structural metrics, qualitative indicators like trust, reciprocity, and collaboration quality reveal the strength of relationships.

Approaches designed for complexity:

- Outcome Harvesting: capture actual outcomes and trace contributions
- Contribution Analysis: test theories of change against evidence
- Most Significant Change: use storytelling to uncover transformative shifts
- Developmental Evaluation: embed evaluation for ongoing learning and adaptation

Frameworks for systems change measurement

Because systems change is emergent and complex, evaluators need flexible frameworks that allow for adaptation. Outcome Harvesting starts from observed changes and works backward to understand contribution, making it ideal for unexpected or emergent outcomes. Contribution Analysis acknowledges multiple actors, testing the plausibility of an initiative's role in observed change without overstating causality. The Most Significant Change method uses participatory storytelling to capture transformative impacts from the perspective of stakeholders, ensuring that voices often excluded from traditional evaluation are heard. Developmental Evaluation supports innovation by embedding real-time feedback and learning loops, enabling organizations to adapt as new dynamics unfold.

From rigid targets to adaptive learning:

- Begin with guiding questions instead of predetermined KPIs
- Hold regular reflection and sensemaking sessions with stakeholders
- Adjust indicators as new patterns and relationships emerge
- Embrace uncertainty as a feature of complex systems, not a flaw

Learning agendas over fixed KPIs

In complex and adaptive systems, fixed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) often constrain learning and create tunnel vision. Instead of measuring progress against pre-set targets, social innovators can use learning agendas that start with open questions: What changes are we noticing? What patterns are emerging? By convening stakeholders in regular reflection sessions — for example, quarterly sensemaking workshops — organizations can collectively interpret shifts in the system and refine indicators to match reality. This process acknowledges that change rarely follows a straight line and that uncertainty is natural in systemic transformation. A learning agenda fosters curiosity, collective ownership of insights, and adaptability. It prioritizes building shared understanding over meeting arbitrary metrics, making measurement a tool for discovery rather than compliance.

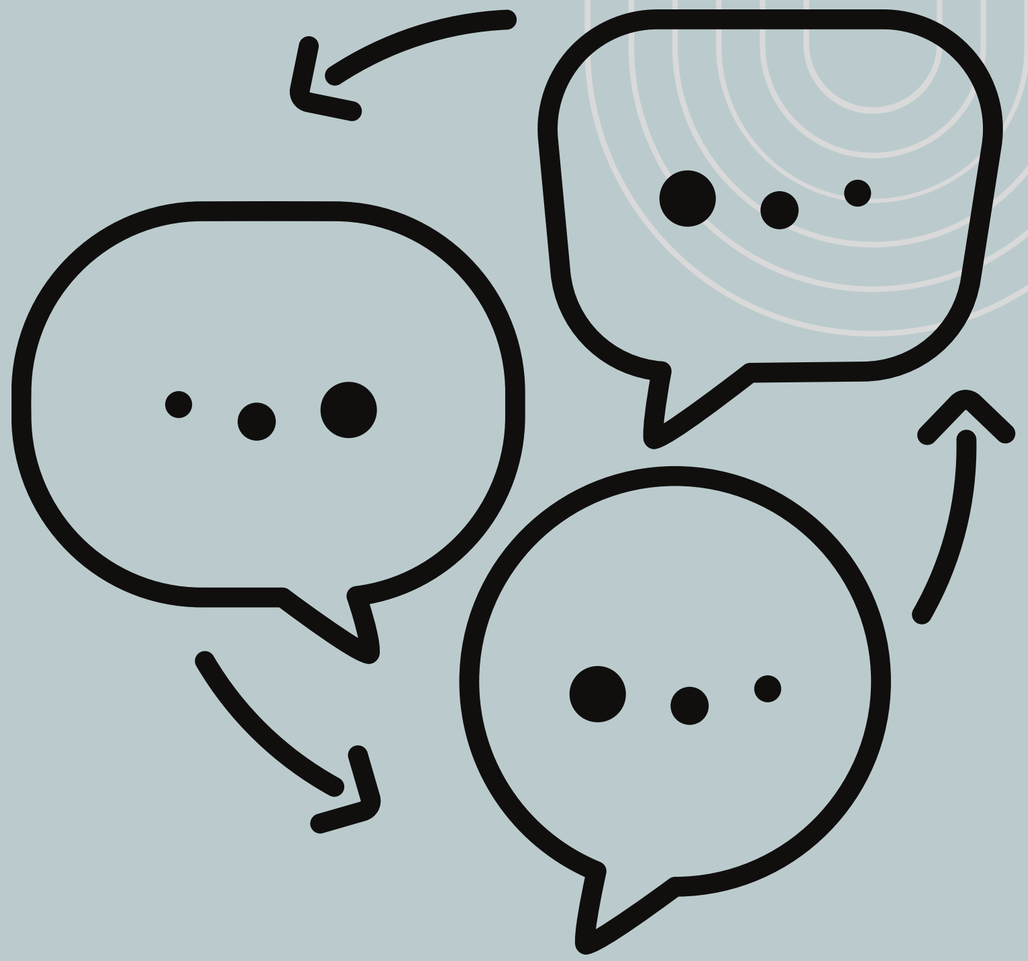
Common challenges when measuring systems change:

- Confusing activity with impact: equating busy work with transformation
- Overlooking unintended consequences and negative externalities
- Overclaiming causality in complex, multi-actor systems
- Extractive or burdensome data practices that exploit communities

Pitfalls & measurement biases

Measuring systems change comes with significant risks. One of the most frequent pitfalls is mistaking outputs for outcomes — for example, counting the number of workshops delivered rather than assessing how power dynamics or relationships shifted as a result. Another challenge is ignoring unintended consequences. A program might strengthen one part of a system while inadvertently weakening another, and responsible measurement must capture both positive and negative ripple effects. Overclaiming causality is also a danger: in complex environments, no single actor can claim full credit for systemic change, and attempting to do so misrepresents reality. Finally, many evaluations risk becoming extractive when communities are asked for data without receiving value or insights in return.

Can you name share your experience with measurment frameworks & challenges ?



Let's discuss!

Common challenges when measuring systems change:

- Systems mapping platforms (Kumu, Miro) to illustrate actors, flows, and leverage points
- Network analysis tools (UCINET, Gephi) to measure density, centrality, and diversity
- Data visualization methods to reveal hidden patterns and relationships

Tools for mapping & analysis

Mapping and analysis tools allow practitioners to see the bigger picture of how a system functions. Platforms like Kumu and Miro help teams co-create system maps that show who is involved, how they are connected, and where key leverage points exist. Network analysis software such as UCINET and Gephi provides quantitative data on structural aspects of networks, including central actors, network density, and inclusion of diverse voices. These analytical tools make it possible to identify where influence is concentrated and where interventions might unlock systemic change. Visualizing systems in this way helps teams move beyond assumptions to evidence-based strategies.

Guiding inclusive and systemic evaluation:

- Participatory evaluation guides (BetterEvaluation, participatory storytelling)
- Social innovation frameworks (SROI, Theory of Change, developmental evaluation)
- Practical toolkits for adaptive learning and reflection

Resources for participation & frameworks

Beyond mapping and analysis, it is essential to have resources that support inclusive and adaptive evaluation. Participatory evaluation guides encourage evaluators to design processes where communities co-create indicators and contribute their own narratives of change. Frameworks such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and Theory of Change help connect local actions to broader systemic outcomes. Developmental evaluation toolkits provide methods for embedding learning loops in real time, ensuring that strategies evolve with changing conditions. By combining participatory approaches with structured frameworks, practitioners can balance rigor with inclusivity, generating insights that are both technically sound and socially grounded.

THANK YOU

Have any question?