Beyond being in fashion

Kevin Seely, 08/02/13

If you're reading this, you're probably in fashion. From *Forbes* to *The Guardian* to *Engineers Without Borders*, everyone is talking about 'systemic change'. Cynics will say that the buzz will pass. At the Springfield Centre, we hope not. We see new, more ambitious development programmes making bigger differences than their predecessors. These are programmes that change whole systems, influencing how people and organisations go about their business.

Programmes that push for systemic change are not following the latest trend. They are in fact re-applying a concept that has worked elsewhere. Allow me to illustrate:

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

The quote is from Martin Luther King's 1967 *Beyond Vietnam*. It was delivered by a man who saw the limitations of charity hand-outs in the fight against exclusion and poverty. Dr King wanted large-scale, sustainable change. His movement has achieved a lot, and continues to push for more.

Few would call the civil rights movement a fashion. Yet other meaningful efforts to achieve systemic change are less assured of lasting attention. In the rest of this article I briefly explain why I think that is, and what we can feasibly do about it.

Part of the problem is people's perceptions. Whereas the civil rights movement was seen as radical, making markets work more efficiently is often seen as timid. Trying to make government policies more effective, in contrast, is often viewed as impossible.

Another part of the problem is the "we've seen it all before syndrome." Most people agree that the methods used to assist development have changed substantively in recent decades. Yet for every idea that has endured, how many others haven't? Do you remember Structural Adjustment? Rural Development? Luckily for 'systemic change', the term has already survived for decades. Nonetheless, the decline of other big ideas gives an excuse to people who feel that systemic approaches threaten how their past work or experience is valued, their ability to raise money, their ability to divert attention, or to keep it.

To make matters worse, systemic approaches are in some ways anti-fashion. Fast results are in fashion; changing systems tends to take longer than giving things away. In some places, spending as little as possible on staff is in fashion. Understanding a system, and changing it, requires more and higher-skilled staff than giving things away.

In short, while systemic approaches are gaining a higher profile in both developed and developing countries, it is not inevitable that they become a lasting part of how people deliver development assistance. Nor is it impossible. For those of us that care, I'd like to recommend five easy things that we can do to avoid 'systemic change' being written off as just another fleeting fashion.

First, we can measure and share evidence showing that systemic approaches truly make a difference. As the examples here and here show, making markets work more efficiently can raise the incomes of millions of poor women and men. And as the example here shows, development assistance can sustainably change how governments act and are held to account.

Secondly, we can base our appeals to invest in changing systems (instead of tackling symptoms) on this evidence. We can compare the size and sustainability of systemic approaches' past benefits, or projected ones, with alternatives such as direct delivery approaches. Only if people associate 'systemic approaches' with substantive improvements in the effectiveness of development assistance, is it likely to avoid "fashion" status.

Thirdly, as 'pro-poor systemic change' gains weight among donors, we can focus on the principles that make our interventions most likely to create it. A closely related term is already being abused. Where farmers now depend on a development programme to act as their broker with retailers, the term 'facilitation' is sometimes used to make their role sound more sustainable than it is.

Defending the principles behind 'systemic change' starts with making your definition of it clear. In this article, I'm using the definitions of 'system' and 'systemic change' in the glossary of the M4P Operational Guide. Let's also question what others mean by 'systemic change'. Three of my favourite questions are 'why isn't it already happening?', 'who has the will and skill to make it happen?' and 'who will pay for it when the programme ends?'.

Fourthly, we can encourage the vogue for Value for Money, whilst criticising interpretations that actually undermine it. The fashionable thirst for "quick wins" is one. Most people would agree that a development programme's value is greater if it leaves behind a process that benefits more people after it ends. Should donors give such high priority to "quick wins", when so many of these "wins" are one-offs? Equally, we can promote the view that how many staff programmes hire should be based on a true assessment of the costs and benefits. Hiring too many is inefficient, but cutting staff just to look efficient is a false economy.

Finally, we can admit to failures and acknowledge limits. Let's avoid accusations that we claim to have found a "silver bullet", a status that incites understandable cynicism.

To end, allow me to counter another source of understandable cynicism. A lot of people get excited by novelty, and so new fashions are bound to arise. And despite the good intentions of many development practitioners, the temptation to win bids by following fashions is great. The Forbes article on systemic change illustrates how, even in mainstream business thinking, this kind of short-termism is unproductive. As change happens ever faster, winning streaks quickly become losing streaks. Long-term performance once again counts. That may be bad news for fashion followers, but if we can show their lasting value, it's good news for systemic approaches.