

SYSTEMIC SYSTEMWASHING: Making Systemic Meaningful Again

We always try to take the pulse of what's happening in the systemsphere. A few years ago, we noted that systemic language – not necessarily clarity and good practice – [was on the rise](#). Now that OMG's uncle, Al Gorithm, fills our feeds with what the latest systems thinkers are posting on Medium, it feels like there's a flood of systemic, well, everything. What does this tell us? Are we collectively getting more systemic? Or is everybody just taking the (syste)Mick?



OMG, why are our socials so full of systemfluencers these days?



Systems are like Hansel in Zoolander – just so hot right now. In international development, the misuse of the term systemic is rife, often due to a desire to sound strategic and sophisticated or to invoke structural critique without clarity. But now that everyone's using the term, is there a risk that we choke on our own jargon monoxide? For example, "Governance for Systemic and Transformational Change" – who wouldn't want some of that... but what does it really mean?



You're becoming cynical, OMG. Maybe you need a holiday. Lots of things are systemic. Poverty, inequality, the failure of the England men's football team to win a World Cup since 1966. In recent weeks, we saw 'systemic' related to climate change, impact investing, gender norms and regulatory reforms. Humour us, OMG. We have always pushed for more systemic thinking and action, so what's the downside of more people identifying as systems thinkers, doers and funders?



Labels are easy. 'Systemwashing' is becoming a thing. Like greenwashing, it's a branding exercise that cloaks business as usual in the language of progressive change. By putting a splash of systems dressing on your development word salad, your proposal gets funded or your post gets all liked up. But in many cases, while poverty is framed as a systemic problem, the proposed solutions look strikingly conventional and un-systemic. Like planting kitchen gardens. Or training ten women to sew. You can't fix a poisoned water supply with a life coach.



Hmm, sage words from the nepo-bot. But with an uncle who said he invented the internet, we'd expect nothing less. Because we can be so wobbly about what systemic even means, there is a risk of putting systemic lipstick on a direct delivery pig.



And now you have made us think about it, there's another downside to overusing the S word. If a problem is systemic, then of course it's complex, intractable and not your fault if your soggy solution doesn't work. It's not you, it's the system. You're inoculated against critique. A handy get-out-of-jail-free card, right?



And you called me cynical...? But you have a point. Calling something systemic can be a convenient sleight of hand: a way to shift blame from individuals to structures. And it's a way to sound serious while dodging specifics.

'Systemsplaining' is the development industry's version of mansplaining. Real-world problems are cloaked in jargon-laden explanations of systems thinking, with superficial insights wrapped up in performative complexity, sprinkled with recycled buzzwords and infused with a dose of intellectual superiority – but little in the way of practicable actions. Instead of the comforting vagueness of the system-washer, with the systemsplainer you get the awestruck sense that this guy really knows his sh*t because you can't understand him: "But slash-and-burn farming is just a visible symptom of deeper landscape-level governance deficits. We need to convene a multi-stakeholder platform to align incentives across the socio-ecological nexus."



So, what's the alternative, OMG? If we've oversystemed everything, how do we Make Systemic Meaningful Again?



The answer isn't more systemic thinking, it's better. Less diagram porn, more awkward conversations. Less bloviation, more action. Systemic used to mean we were prepared to go deep and seek clarity. Now it's often just a vibe, like slapping 'artisanal' on a jar of mayonnaise. And it's supposed to be about guiding our actions, to be more effective. So, if you're gonna say the system's broken, then act like it. Stay empirical. Demystify. Take risks. Make change happen.



Hard hitting, OMG. Quality over quantity, crunchiness over sogginess, perspiration over aspiration. But we still learn things in the real world that you don't pick up on in the virtual one. A powerful way to reclaim the essence of a systems approach is to deploy the Fight Club mantra: the first rule of a systemic approach is that we don't talk about a systemic approach. If we're all suffering from system fatigue, let's reclaim systems by not talking about them at all. Rather, use your common sense and common words to fight the systemic fight.



Indeed. There's another type of creature out there, stealthier and more elusive: the system-seeker. They tend to be well camouflaged so they are easy to miss. They are grounded and pragmatic. They talk the language of the sectors they work in and the partners they work with. A systemic approach is part of their DNA – their software – and not their business card or LinkedIn profile. They make it mean something to the right people, not all things to all people. They work on specifics, put boundaries around systems, make sense of messiness, add value to their partners, get stuff done.

It's a jungle out there so if you want more help in spotting (or avoiding) systemwashers and systemsplainers, check out this [field guide to system species](#).

And then take a look in the mirror: are you a washer, a 'splainer or a seeker?