Pathways in Place
Co-Creating Community Capabilities

Defining success for place-based systems change approaches

There is growing attention on place-based systems change approaches to help address complex social problems. There is agreement on the goal of these approaches- to address problems and, ultimately, improve population health outcomes. However, researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and funders grapple with the question of how do we define success at the system level? In this Findings Snapshot, we address this question. Defining success for place-based systems change approaches will help those who fund, design, implement, and evaluate place-based systems change approaches and advance knowledge about the effectiveness of these approaches.

Why does it matter?

There are a growing number of researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and community members who are applying place-based systems change approaches that embrace complexity and seek systems-level change to improve population outcomes.[1]

Yet there has been limited attention on what success looks like at the system level. Defining success at the system level will help with designing, implementing, and evaluating place-based systems change approaches.

Want to learn more about Pathways in Place?
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Box 1: What are place-based systems change approaches?

Unlike programmatic, individual behaviour change approaches, place-based system change approaches focus on system-level change within a defined geographic area. Place-based system change approaches seek to tackle complex problems by identifying and addressing the underlying causes of problems through coordinated actions across the system. These approaches show promise for improving population outcomes because they pay attention to the inherent complexity of social problems, recognise the need for localised solutions, and focus on the 'whole' and how different parts of a system interact to influence population outcomes.

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The Theory of System Change, developed by the Pathways in Place-Victoria University team (see full paper here), proposes that sustainable well-functioning systems create conditions for improved population outcomes for current and future generations.[2]

Creating well-functioning systems means that that the community is better able to tackle other health issues, and not just the health issue targeted by the immediate actions. Therefore health gains are multiplied.

So what are the neccessary characteristics of well-functioning systems? What practices would those within a system, such as practitioners, policy-makers and researchers need to adopt to form a well-functioning system? And how are these practices sustained?

What did we do?

To identify the properties of and practices within a well-functioning system, as a part of the overall Theory of Systems Change, we engaged in four phases:

Phase 1: Preliminary activities, which informed the scope for the Theory System Change and involved co-creating the funding proposal.

Phase 2: Backwards mapping, which provided a framework for data collection and analysis and included:

(a) Defining the desired long-term outcomes,

(b) Determining the inter-related properties of and practices within a well-functioning system.

(c) Determining the conditions that support these practices in the long-term (sustainment).

(d) Considering the relationships between these three components , including how they reinforce or strengthen each other.

Phase 3: Development of series of propositions related to the components above.

Phase 4: Conceptualisation of key terms consistent with our approach (place-based systems change) and field (public health).

For more details about each phase, see An Approach for Developing Middle-Range Theory

What were our findings?

The Theory of Systems Change (see Figure 1) proposes that the practices neccessary for well-functioning systems are **collaboration** within and across sectors and domains; **adaption** to external opportunities and challenges; **alignment** with the strengths and needs of the population; engagement in **evidence-driven action and learning cycles**.
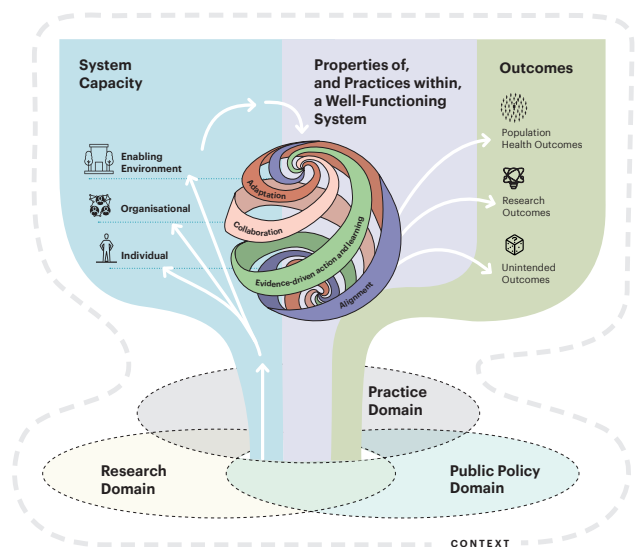

Figure 1: Theory of systems change

These inter-connected practices apply across research, practice and policy. Table 1 defines these practices and explains their importance.[3-14]

For these practices to be sustainable, capacities to adapt, align, engage in evidence-driven action and learning and collaborate must be embedded in the system. Embedding capacity in the system requires intentionally building the individual, organisational and enabling environment dimensions of capacity across research, practice, and public policy, and strengthening relationships within and between the dimensions and domains. [15-18]

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Table 1: Practices necessary for a well-functioning system

Practice	Why is it important?
Adaptation '…ability to respond to external changes – both opportunities and challenges. [19, 20]'	Adaptation is important because systems exist in a dynamic environments that continually change. Facing uncertainties and effectively responding to these changes allows for correction of errors and adjustments so systems can preserve their functionality and improve over time. Adaptation is not just a valuable property of a system but organisations that are able to adapt to external pressures tend to be more successful.[9]
Alignment '…sharing the same or complementary perceived needs of the target population and how these needs will be met across various system levels (e.g. target population, practitioners, researchers, policy-makers).[13]'	Alignment across a system is crucial for effective and efficient functioning of the system.[13] Alignment facilitates the interconnectedness and interdependence of all parts of the system. Lack of alignment can lead to systemic failures, inefficiencies, or unintended consequences, as the individual parts of the system may accidentally work against each other.
Collaboration '…any joint activity by two or more parties to link or share information, resources, activities, and capabilities to achieve aims that no single party could have achieved separately.[21]'	Cross-sector and multi-sector collaboration is crucial for place-based, systems change initiatives.[22] Collaboration between and across sectors has many benefits such as improved service delivery, increased social capital, improved population outcomes, knowledge and information exchange, mobilisation and/or leveraging of new resources, the formation of a critical mass for action, and increased sustainability of evidence-informed interventions. [23-25]
Evidence-driven action and learning Evidence-driven action and learning is a continual cycle that guides decision-making and action and includes: 1. Situation analysis and problem framing 2. Co-created, purposefully coordinated evidence-driven actions that target multiple levels of the system to address underlying causes; 3. Monitoring and evaluation, which includes cycles of learning and 4. Communication and dissemination of knowledge and facilitating its application through networks and across the system.[2]	Evidence shows that when collaborative entities actively engage in evidence-driven action and learning, they enhance health-related behaviours, potentially resulting in better overall health outcomes for the population.[26] Additionally, the Theory of Organisational Learning proposes that established methods and processes of learning from failures play a crucial role in building resilient and reliable organizations.[11]

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What does this mean for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers?

Defining the practices of well-functioning systems that apply across domains 'grounds' the otherwise abstract concepts that dominate literature about place-based systems change.

By defining the practices of, and necessary capacities for, well-functioning systems, we:

- clarify how researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, their organisations, and their outputs contribute to a well-functioning system;

- help focus the design and implementation of place-based systems change approaches by providing a focus and target for these efforts;

- elevate the importance of capacity building so that it is prioritised in place-based systems change initiatives;

- Suggest that the 'outcomes' of place-based systems change initiatives should be assessed through not only changes in problem area of focus, but also changes in the practices and capacities necessary for capacity for well-functioning systems

- make it possible to measure and evaluate the success of place-based systems change approaches. Our team is currently in the process of developing a measure of these practices, which can be used to evaluate place-based systems change approaches.

About Pathways in Place

Pathways in Place: Co-Creating Community Capabilities is an innovative program of research and action that supports flourishing of children and young people. This Program is jointly delivered by Victoria University (Victoria, Australia) and Griffith University (Queensland, Australia) with funding generously provided by the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Program teams are each leading one of two complementary streams:

1. Early learning and development pathways (children and youth 0-15 y.o.), led by Griffith University in Logan (Queensland, Australia).
2. Pathways through education to employment (youth 15-24 y.o.), led by Victoria University in Brimbank (Victoria, Australia).

LOGAN, QLD

BRIMBANK, VIC

Suggested citation

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