Addressing many of today’s most pressing societal, economic and environmental problems requires both engaging broad public audiences and working within complex systems of institutions, actors and drivers to mobilize solutions.

Governments are democratically-elected to address these problems — but they can’t do so alone. Success requires a systems-based approach that takes into account the values of citizens, identifies leverage points for intervention and builds collaboration among multiple actors.

Participatory Systems Change is a new approach to address these challenges. This approach redefines key aspects of engagement, including:

- Sponsorship
- Issue Framing
- Sequencing
- The nature of democratic exchange
- The method of analysis
- Strategies for mass communication
SPONSORSHIP

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Sponsorship establishes political accountability
“Who is responsible?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Decision-makers sponsor engagement

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Sponsorship establishes credibility and impact
“Who is needed to effect change?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
Sponsors may include...
• Decision-makers
• Stakeholders with credibility across perspectives
• Coalitions that can ensure continuity beyond election cycles
• Actors critical for implementation
• Citizens

ISSUE FRAMING

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Frame is set narrowly based on decision-makers’ needs and desired outcomes
“Here’s what we want to talk about.”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Issues are framed through internal government process

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Frame is set broadly by understanding the system and by engaging the public and stakeholders early in defining issues
“What is the goal, where can change happen and who needs to be involved?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Participatory processes to co-create framing with diverse interests and stakeholders
• Scoping through interviews, focus groups, idea jams, etc.
• Systems mapping experts work with content experts and stakeholders to identify leverage points
SEQUENCING

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Linear: series of steps to get from A to B
“What is the most direct route to the solution?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Decision-makers only involved at beginning and end
• Public feeds experts, experts feed decision-makers

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Iterative and integrative: developing a phased process that creates solutions through learning and experimentation
“ Issues are complex and are rarely solved through a linear process. There needs to be space for feedback loops.”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Integration between the activities of experts, citizens and decision-makers to build upon each other’s work and provide multiple opportunities to inform each other’s contributions
• Uncertainty is embraced through prototyping and experimentation
• Sufficient time is allocated to allow for iteration and co-creation

NATURE OF DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Process is a linear flow of information where feedback is received, internally analyzed and responded to by designated decision-makers
“How can we solicit input from individuals?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Traditional town-halls, open houses, public hearings
• Surveys
• Online portals to collect expert submissions

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Process creates spaces for learning, deep reflection and informed judgment
“How can we engage affected parties to co-create viable solutions?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Deliberative processes for citizens to explore options and trade-offs, and to make recommendations that are guided by evidence and citizen values
• Participants work in groups across a range of interests and perspectives
• Organizers recruit participation by equity-seeking communities and take steps to equalize power
• “Large group” methods such as Real Time Strategic Change and Open Space Technology maximize participant contributions.
METHOD OF ANALYSIS

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Reduce and manage complexity
“How can we solve this particular issue?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Issues are addressed in isolation
• “Either / or” decisions
• Needs assessment on a specific issue without reference to others

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Address complexity
“How do the relationships between issues and actors inform solutions?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Systems mapping
• Identifying points of intervention
• Working through tensions or polarities
• Labs
• Collective impact

MASS COMMUNICATIONS

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES
Communications strategies amplify a message
“How do we make our case and control the message?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Traditional communications strategies: how to deliver the right message to the right audience at the right time?

PARTICIPATORY SYSTEMS CHANGE
Communications strategies broaden the reach of the democratic exchange to build a shared public narrative
“How do we move forward together?”

WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE:
• Mobilizing evidence-based information Two-way exchanges (e.g. competitions, Twitter town halls)
• Toolkits for stakeholder-hosted “kitchen table conversations” to spread awareness and inform larger process
• Community-based ambassadors
• Game-based engagement (gamification)