

What is a system?

A system is a set of parts (e.g., organizations, geographic regions, issues, sectors, movements) that are interconnected. The boundaries of any given system are determined by people and organizations and the parts can move in and out of this boundary (e.g., organizations identifying or not identifying as part of a field). Systems are also dynamic, which means that they continually change over time.

A system can be included within the boundaries of another system (e.g., a school in a school district in the education system). Systems may also overlap without being fully subsumed like a Venn diagram (e.g., education, health, and juvenile justice systems overlapping in relation to academic achievement).

Systems change refers to changing the parts and their relationships within a system with the understanding that this change will have ripple effects. Systems change often focuses on structures, policies and processes, but these are only some of the ways to change systems. Other ways include shifting resources, values, power, mindsets, infrastructure and many more. Moreover, systems change involves shifting the conditions that hold the problem in place.

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