

# Systems Approaches to Public Service Delivery:

## Methods and Frameworks

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### Abstract

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly embracing *systems approaches* to deal with the complexity of public service delivery and policy evaluation. However, the diversity of these methods and their lack of common theoretical grounding has limited constructive engagement between those working within the systems tradition and those working outside it. We address this by reviewing and critically synthesizing systems literature from the fields of health, education, and infrastructure. We argue that the common theoretical core of systems approaches is the idea that *multi-dimensional complementarities* between a policy and other aspects of the policy context are the first-order problem of policy design and evaluation. What differentiates systems approaches from other research traditions is thus not so much a specific method as a general difference in question prioritization, and consequently greater methodological pluralism. We distinguish between *macro-systems* approaches, which focus on the collective coherence of a set of policies or institutions, and *micro-systems* approaches, which focus on how a single policy interacts with the context in which it operates. We develop a typology of micro-systems approaches and their relationship to standard impact evaluation methods, and discuss their relationship to adjacent concepts such as external validity, implementation science, and complexity theory.

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