#132 - Properties of and practices within a well-functioning system: implications for scaling and sustainment

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Objectives/aims
The dominant approach to scaling and sustainment in implementation science has been to broaden the delivery of evidence-based interventions while maintaining their fidelity (scaling) and ensuring their continued use in practice (sustainment). However, recent studies have acknowledged the limitations of this approach, including the linearity of implementation processes and the lack of attention to the broader systems in which interventions are delivered.

As a result, attention is turning to the importance of system-level change and adopting systems thinking perspectives in implementation science. Yet the systems thinking literature is limited by abstract concepts and scarce critique of ideal practices within well-functioning systems. This presents a challenge for the application of systems thinking perspectives.

In this presentation, we draw on the Theory of Systems Change to advance both the systems thinking and implementation science literature.

The presentation aims to: (1) introduce a series of practices within and properties of well-functioning systems that create the conditions for improved population health outcomes and can be scaled across systems, problems, and target populations, and (2) explain how these practices can be sustained within and across systems.

Methods
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 the following phases:

Phase 1: Preliminary activities

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Preliminary activities involved co-creating the funding proposal with researchers, practitioners, and the funder and a series of meetings among the research team and other stakeholders, which informed the scope for the Theory System Change.

Phase 2: Backwards mapping

The main components included:
a) Defining the desired long-term outcomes (population health improvements).
b) Determining the inter-related properties of and practices within a well-functioning system that create the conditions for improved population health outcomes.
c) Determining the conditions that support these practices in the long-term (sustainment).
d) Considering the relationships between a-c, including how they reinforce or strengthen each other.

These components provided a framework for data collection and analysis. Through an iterative process, we cycled between deduction from existing theories and evidence, and induction from the experiences of other researchers, practitioners and policy-makers, as well as our own research findings and practice.

Phase 3: Development of propositions

We developed a series of propositions related to the components above, based on our learnings from the deductive and inductive synthesis.

Phase 4: Conceptualising key terms: We adopted conceptualisations that are consistent with our approach (place-based systems change) and field (public health). When we could not find existing conceptualisations that fit our purpose, we adapted existing conceptualisations or created our own.

Main findings
Practices of and Properties within Well-Functioning Systems
The Theory of Systems Change proposes that the properties of and practices within well-functioning systems include adaptation to external opportunities and challenges; alignment with the strengths and needs of the target population; collaboration within and across sectors; and engagement in evidence-driven action and learning. These practices apply across research, practice and public policy domains and indicate what it means for researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to be a part of a well-functioning system.

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Recognising that each community is different in the conditions that give rise to the problems it faces, the Theory of Systems Change proposes that adaptation, alignment, collaboration, and evidence-driven action and learning can be scaled out across systems to address different problems for different groups.
Well-functioning systems support the scale-out of evidence-based interventions. When systems are well-functioning, they are more likely to learn from and draw on new knowledge. Thus creating a reinforcing loop whereby systems are flexible, continuously learn, and can adopt and implement appropriate evidence-based interventions.

How are these practices sustained?

- The Theory of Systems Change conceptualises sustainment as the maintenance of the practices of adaptation, alignment, collaboration and evidence-driven action and learning, and the mechanism through which this is achieved is embedding capacity into systems. To embed capacity in systems, the individual, organisational and enabling environment dimensions of capacity and relationships within and between these dimensions and across the domains of research, practice and public policy must be strengthened.
- Individual level capacity is the confidence in applying, skills to apply, positive attitudes towards, and knowledge about adaptation, alignment, collaboration and engaging in evidence-driven action and learning.
- Organisational level capacity includes culture and leadership, systems and structures (e.g. IT systems, procedures, policies) that value, support, and encourage adaptation, alignment, collaboration and evidence-driven action and learning.
- An enabling environment influences the capacity of individuals and organisations to adapt, align, collaborate and engage in evidence-driven action and learning. One aspect of an enabling environment is public policy (e.g. legislation, funding processes). Public policy that embodies and/or values, supports and encourages adaptation, alignment, collaboration, and evidence-driven action and learning facilitates and reinforces these practices across the system (e.g. at individual and organisation level).
- There are reciprocal relationships across three capacity dimensions; individuals shape organisations, and organisations support the development of individuals; public policy can support the capacity of organisations, and organisations can inform public policy. Further, system capacity is strengthened with relational infrastructure, or building collaboration within and between research, practice, and public policy.