

The Notion of Systemic Change

At a meeting in Rome in 2007, the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change made a presentation to the heads of many of the branches of the Vincentian Family on systemic change and proposed that this theme be the Family's common theme for the next several years. In response, the Mother General, Sr. Evelyne, remarked: "I find this theme very interesting. It gives a name to what so many in the Family are already trying to do, and it clarifies and concretizes the idea." It was clear to Sr. Evelyne and it is clear to all the members of the Commission that the underlying idea of systemic change is already at work in many projects within the Vincentian Family, even if the process has not been defined step by step.

The basic idea

Today, those working among the poor speak more and more of the need for systemic change. In order to understand a systemic-change approach better, some analysis of the idea may be helpful.

Essentially, a system is a whole, a unified composite of things that work together. As a system's parts interact, they affect each other constantly, either for better or for worse.

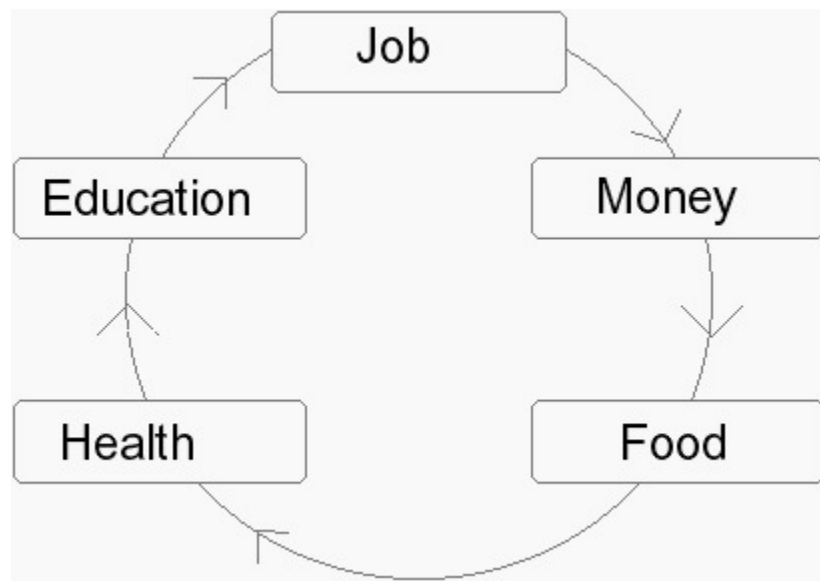
Today scientists focus continually on "systems". Astronomers view the universe as a system. If a star explodes, everything else in the universe feels the effect. Doctors view the body as a system. If my blood is diseased, it affects everything else. Economists and sociologists view society as a system. If the economic and social elements that make up society function together positively, people thrive; if one or several of those elements are functioning badly, the whole system begins to break down.

So, basically, systemic change thinking affirms that "everything is connected to everything else." Recognizing this, it becomes clear that, in order to change the situation of the poor, we must focus not only on one particular problem, like supplying them with food, important as that may be at times, but on the overall circumstances of their lives. Experience teaches that "quick fix" solutions, while temporarily helpful, prove inadequate in the long run.

An illustration of how systemic change works

Each of us lives within a socioeconomic system whose parts interact with each other. If the system is working well, it favors personal growth. If not, it thwarts growth and accelerates decline. If, for example, I don't have a job, I don't earn money. If I don't earn money, I can't buy food for my family. If my son doesn't have sufficient food, he suffers malnutrition. If he suffers malnutrition, he can't study well. If he can't study well, he won't graduate from school. If he doesn't graduate from school, he may not get a job. If he doesn't have a job, he doesn't earn money. So the circle begins again.

The challenge for a systems thinker is to know where and how to break the circle. In Akamasoa, Fr. Pedro Opeka began by creating jobs. These, in turn, generated revenue. Gradually, people were able to buy food, build homes and send their children to school. Their lives improved dramatically. In other systemic change projects, the point of



intervention is different. In San José de Ocoa in the Dominican Republic, water was the key. Clean water brought improved health. Irrigation brought crops that provided nourishment and also revenue. Revenue led to better homes and sanitation. With the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines, micro-credit was the key. It enabled people to buy land, build homes, and organize other projects like digging wells, creating a sewage system and opening shops.

Criteria of Systemic Change Projects

As is evident from what I have said, not every project involves systemic change. Many good projects address urgent, immediate needs, but do not go beyond that. Different from these, a systemic change project has, among others, the following characteristics:

1. Wide-ranging social impact on the life of the poor person

This is the most basic characteristic of systemic change: that is, that the project helps change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it.

2. Sustainability

The project helps create the social structures that are needed for a permanent change in the lives of the poor, like employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, ongoing local leadership, etc.

3. Replicability

The project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques that it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances. Concretely, this is demonstrated when the project actually spreads beyond its initial context and is put into effect successfully in settings other than the place where it began.

4. Innovation

The project brings about social change by transforming traditional practice. Change has been achieved through the development and implementation of a pattern-changing idea. To use a phrase often attributed to Albert Einstein, systemic-change thinking helps us “to learn to see the world anew”.