



System Change: A Guidebook for Adopting Portfolio Approaches

**A Methodological Guide for
Understanding and Addressing
Complex Development Challenges**

This guidebook codifies the principles and methods of applying systems change and portfolio approaches to complex development challenges with practical tools and examples. It is based on the empirical learning generated from the collaborative initiatives in UNDP Country Offices in Bhutan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Viet Nam with support from Regional Innovation Centre for Asia and the Pacific.

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Citation: UNDP (2022). System Change: A Guidebook for Adopting Portfolio Approaches. Bangkok, Thailand.

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**United Nations Development Programme
Bangkok Regional Hub**

3rd Floor United Nations Service Building
Rajdamnern Nok Avenue
Bangkok 10200, Thailand
Tel: +66 2 288 3130
Fax: +66 2 280 2700
Email: registry.th@undp.org



Acknowledgement

System Change: A Guidebook for Adopting Portfolio Approaches is developed by Regional Innovation Centre for Asia and the Pacific and supported by UNDP Country Offices in Bhutan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Viet Nam.

The publication is authored by Brent Wellsch of Urban Matters CCC who has been working closely with UNDP along the journey of exploring and testing the portfolio approaches for achieving sustainable development, with guidance and support from Alexandru Oprunenco and Shumin Liu of Regional Innovation Centre for Asia and the Pacific. The valuable inputs and feedback to this publication contributed by the following individuals are greatly appreciated: Francis Capistrano, Bishnu Chettri, Sonam Choki, Floradema Eleazar, Ehsan Gul, Justyna Krol, Rex Lor, Nguyen Tuan Luong, Javeria Masood, Gwyneth Anne Palmos, Giulio Quaggiotto, Kate Sutton, Ida Uusikyla, Kunzang Wangmo, Tshering Wangmo, and Tshoki Zangmo.

Special and sincere thanks to the leadership and hard work done in UNDP Country Offices of Bhutan, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam who are the brave and tenacious forerunners to test the portfolio approaches and learn together with us.

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Introduction

On organizational alignment

This work enables UNDP teams to achieve the greatest possible impact in their work. It seeks to complement other established thematic areas throughout UNDP, rather than compete with them. It captures a portfolio approach that can build coherence across the range of initiatives UNDP is stewarding. It is in that spirit of collaboration that this document should be read.

We hope this guidebook serves you well and you find great use in its contents. **Let's get to it!**

This guidebook presents an approach to help a broad range of development practitioners prepare for, engage in, and manage systems transformation using a portfolio approach in complex development spaces. We developed this guidebook as a way to formalize our process and learnings to date, and leverage these to support others as they initially contemplate—and eventually work towards implementation of a portfolio-based approach for addressing complex development challenges in their own context. It captures the on-the-ground applied learning from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) sponsored project throughout Asia-Pacific from October 2019 to September 2021.

The goal of this project was to use an innovation approach to support circular economy transition in each of these urban centers. The project team applied the approach in Da Nang, Viet Nam; Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan; and Pasig City, the Philippines. It has also been tested in UNDP Bhutan's efforts to address youth unemployment. It was applied throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and fits hybrid delivery model.

Systems Transformation takes into account the complexities of the 21st Century and advocates for a holistic plan to provoke change. As the recent [UNDP Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#) notes, the organization will look beyond sectoral challenges, and deliver projects increasingly as part of portfolios. For example, UNDP is already applying integrated portfolio approaches as the system technical lead on the socio-economic response to COVID-19, and in the 'Rising up for SIDS' approach which combines climate action, blue economies and digital transformation plus access to financing.

To note:

1. You do not need to be an ‘innovation’ practitioner to find value in this document. It is important that the whole organization be welcomed in this space and can use portfolios to pivot programmes.
2. This approach is issue-agnostic and should be applied to a portfolio of work rather than any specific instance. Any case study or practical example from our work provided is meant to illustrate an application point and to inspire you to apply this in your own case.
3. Like most method-based guidebooks, this document is designed to provide guiding principles and instructions but not to serve as something that must be meticulously followed. Feel free to adapt as necessary.
4. This guidebook should be treated as a living document. It represents our best thinking at this moment in time. We anticipate that as our work evolves, our understanding of how to shape and steward this work forward will become more sophisticated. This is particularly true as it relates to the ongoing iteration of a portfolio-based approach over time.

Finally, the portfolio-based approach for driving system transformation has embraced the large array of emerging and established innovation-based approaches. We found it beneficial to find inspiration from the range of methods and approaches that already exist, and to direct our efforts to applying them.





Background

A. Why use a portfolio-based approach?

We are currently living in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. COVID-19 pandemic management, climate change, extreme poverty, mental health and addiction, and systemic racism are just a few examples of the types of challenges that occupy the world around us. Each of these are defined by the characteristics of inherent social complexity:

- They are dynamic and inherently unpredictable.
- The root cause of the issue lacks social consensus.
- There is no way to accurately define the problem. solutions often remain elusive.

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