

# Overview of Systems Approaches in International Education



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RTI International  
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# Why do 'Systems Thinking'?

- Education systems are complex
- Traditional, linear pathways haven't yielded results
- Solutions don't always solve the problem





**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

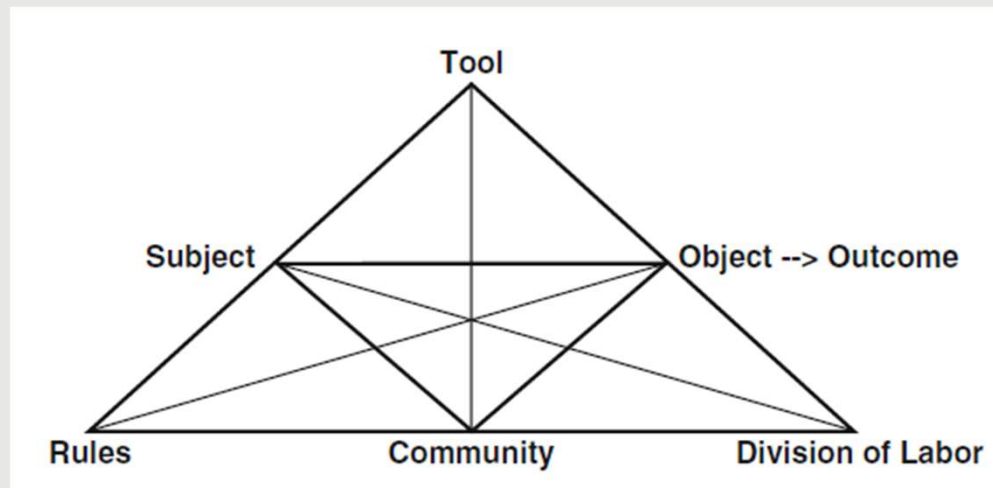
# What about you?

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# What is a system?

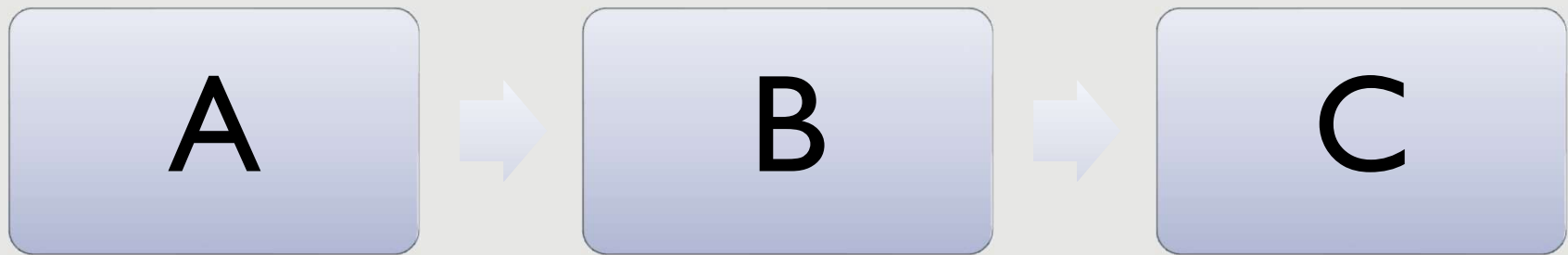
***A system is a group of interconnected components with shared purpose that together achieve more than the sum of their parts (Faul and Savage, 2022).***

- Has roots in educational psychology in Vygotsky's mid-1930's Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Carried forward by his students and an analytical model was developed. (Engestrom, 1987).



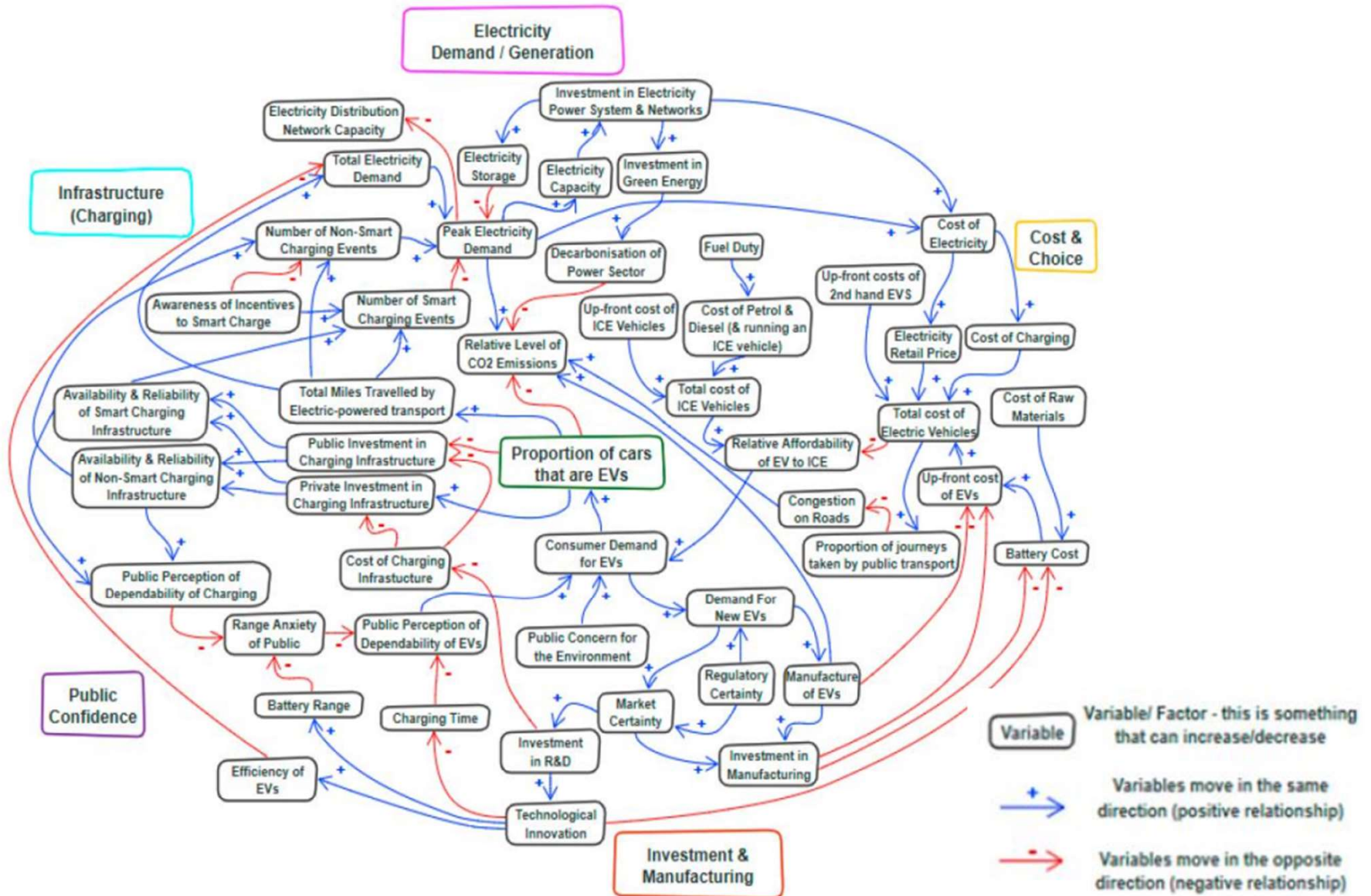
- By the mid-twentieth century systems thinking, has been applied across a range of disciplines.

# What systems thinking is NOT





# What systems thinking IS



Source: Systems Thinking: An Introductory Toolkit for Civil Servants



# An education system encompasses:

- system elements: both material (teachers, schools) and intangible (beliefs, information);
- the relationships between those elements and subsystems;
- the structuring of the system and subsystems within it;
- the functions of the system (both formal/stated and informal/in practice);
- and positive and negative feedback loops and influence pathways in the system.<sup>1</sup>



# Systems Thinking at work in International Education

- RISE Framework and Research Initiative
- GPE's new-ish Model of System Transformation, which requires partner countries to operationalize programming toward improving system drivers
- RTI's Core Functions Framework, which includes focus on setting expectation, interaction between stakeholders, and monitoring for mutual accountability and providing support to those who need it the most
- Work from the Brookings Institution and MSI, VVOB, et al on Scaling
- World Bank's 2018 World Development Report which set out a framework for how to make systems work for learning
- DFID's 2018 Education policy lays out a model with four-layered system
- USAID's 5R's



# Moving from systems thinking to systems practice

- Linear thinking still omnipresent, e.g., ESAs, logframes, SIPs, etc.
- Incentives and aid architecture
- Value of short-term failure





# Thank you



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# The USAID System Strengthening Review

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Richard Eyre, Delivery Associates

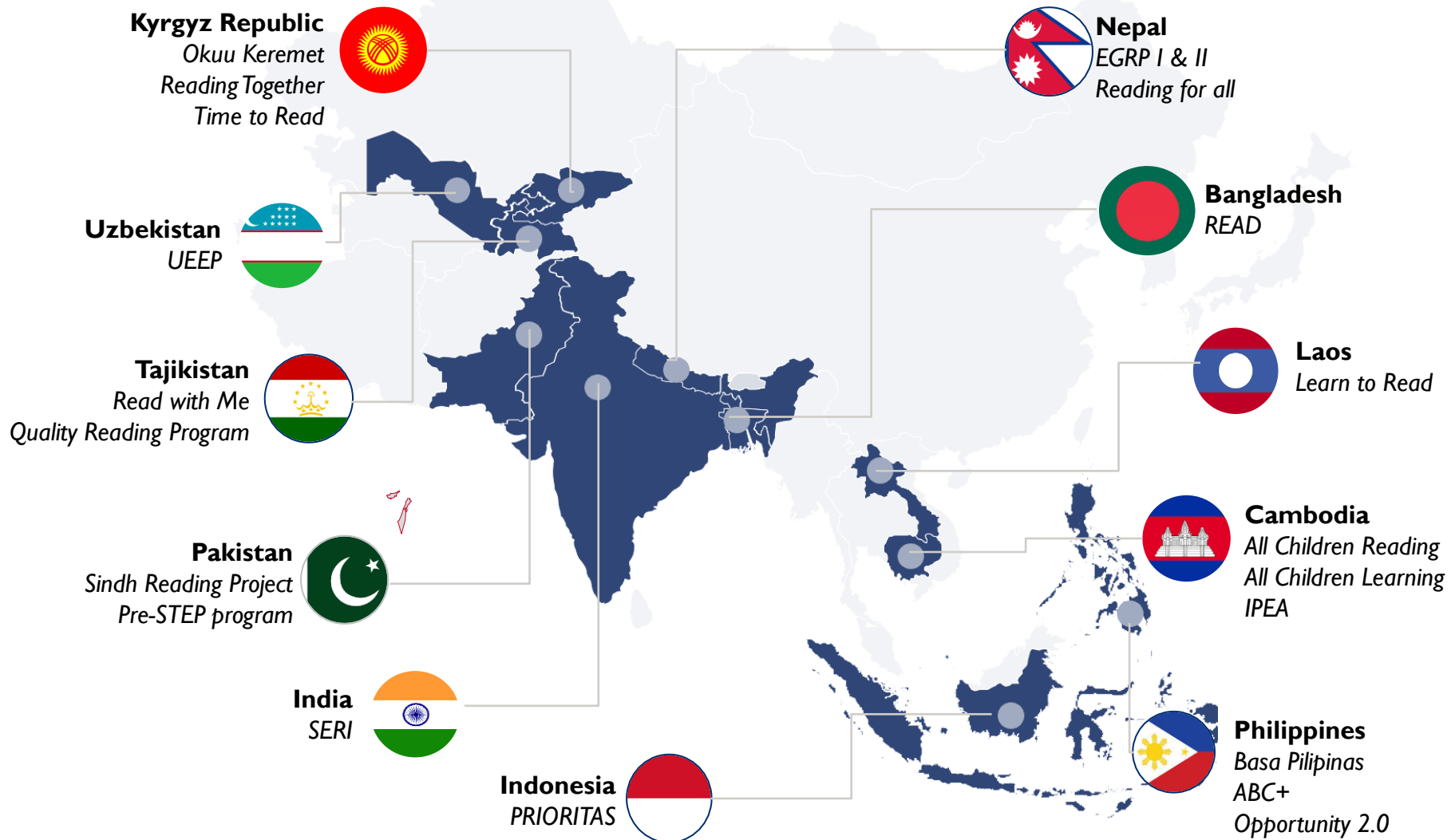
CIES 2023

February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

# — Approach and methodology



# The Systems Strengthening Review looked at 20 USAID education Activities across 11 countries in Asia



# We gathered evidence from four key sources to answer our research questions

## Data sources



### Desk Review

A review of relevant literature including Activity reports and country education plans



### Online Survey

Survey responses **from 90 stakeholders** in USAID Missions, partner ministries, implementing partners



### Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews with **37 stakeholders** from USAID Missions, partner ministries, and implementing partners



### Deep-dive case studies

**16 additional interviews**, additional desk review, and **facilitated self-assessment workshops** for select activities in Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines

## Key Research Questions

1. What did the Activities **set out to do**?
2. What did the Activities **accomplish**?
3. What were the **conditions for success**?
4. What are **learnings** for future USAID Activities?

# Our starting point for understanding “systems strengthening” was the Delivery Capacity Review framework...



## 1. Develop a foundation for delivery

- A. Define your aspiration
- B. Review the current state of delivery
- C. Build the Delivery Unit
- D. Establish a guiding coalition



## 2. Understand the delivery challenge

- A. Evaluate past and present performance
- B. Understand drivers of performance and relevant activities



## 3. Plan for Delivery

- A. Determine your reform strategy
- B. Draw the Delivery Chain
- C. Set targets and establish trajectories



## 4. Drive delivery

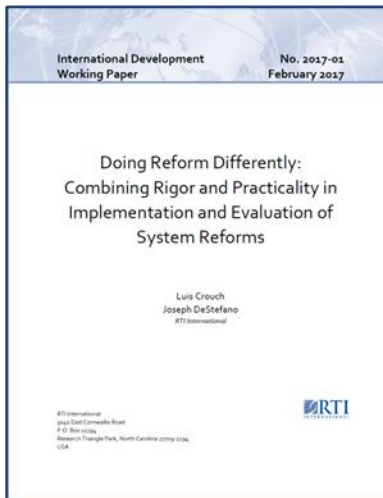
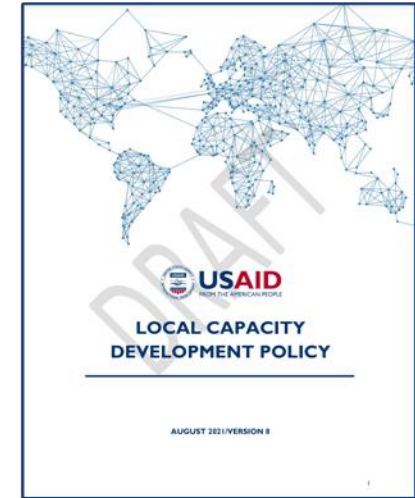
- A. Establish routines to drive and monitor performance
- B. Solve problems early and rigorously
- C. Sustain and continually build momentum



## 5. Create an irreversible culture of delivery

- A. Build system capacity all the time
- B. Communicate the delivery message
- C. Unleash the “alchemy of relationships”

# And the ways “systems strengthening” has been conceptualized in the relevant literature





# Our Analysis Framework breaks down an education system's capacity to implement effective reforms into 10 elements

The Review looked at the extent to which Activities strengthened systems' capacity to:



## 1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy

- 1A.** Define Clear Goals
- 1B.** Determine the Reform Strategy
- 1C.** Visualize the Delivery Chain



## 2. Drive Delivery

- 2A.** Use Data Effectively
- 2B.** Monitor performance and solve problems
- 2C.** Harness the power of relationships



## 3. Create an improvement culture

- 3A.** Review Capacity to Deliver
- 3B.** Build System Capacity all the time
- 3C.** Leverage Educational Technology
- 3D.** Promote equity and inclusion

# We used a rubric to assign traffic-light ratings for each element of capacity, producing a “heatmap” for each Activity

## Ratings Key



**Limited/no evidence** of systems strengthening or increased system capacity



**Some evidence** that the Activity has played a role in building system capacity, but **not consistently or in a way that was sustainable** beyond the life of the activity



**Significant evidence** that the activity has build system capacity in meaningful ways, even if this was **not always consistent or sustainable** beyond the life of the activity



**Strong evidence** that the Activity has built sustainable capacity, strengthening the system's ability to deliver improve outcomes for students **beyond the life of the original Activity**

## Illustrative heatmap for an activity:



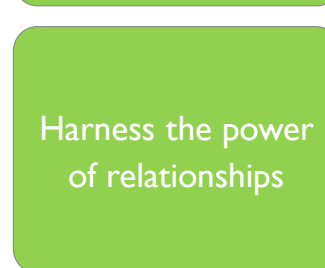
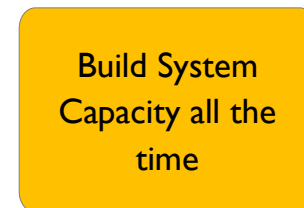
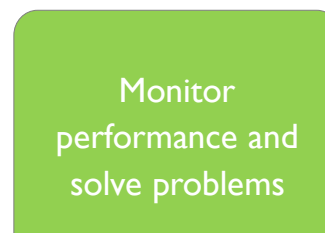
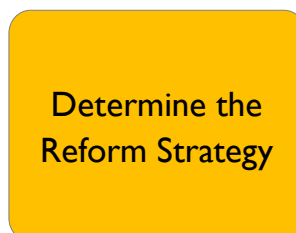
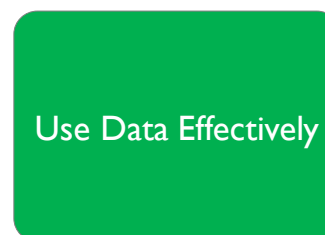
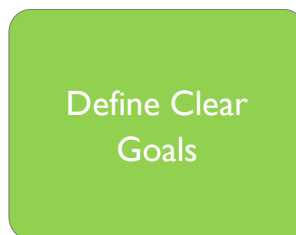
### 1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy



### 2. Drive Delivery



### 3. Create an improvement culture



# — Key Findings: Main trends observed by the Review

# There is evidence of systems strengthening across Activities and across elements capacity

		1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
		A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
BGD	READ	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR
	All Children Reading										
KHM	All Children Learning	AG	G	AG	G	AR	G	AR	AG	AG	AR
	Inclusive Primary Education Activity										
IND	Scaling-Up Early Reading Intervention	AG	AG	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AG	AR	R
IDN	Prioritas	R	AR	AG	AG	AR	AG	AG	AG	AR	AR
LAO	Learn to Read	R	AR	R	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG
	Early Grade Reading Program I										
NPL	Early Grade Reading Program II	G	AG	AR	AG	AR	AR	AG	AG	AR	AR
	Reading for All	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	G
	Sindh Reading Program	AR	AG	R	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AG
PAK	Teacher Education Project		AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AG	AG	R	R
	Basa Pilipinas										
PHL	ABC+	AG	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	AG
	Opportunity 2.0										
	Opportunity 2.0	G	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	G
TJK	Read With Me	AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	R	AG	AG	AG
UZB	Education for Excellence	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	R	R	AR	AR	R

**RED (R)**  
Limited/no evidence of systems strengthening or increased system capacity

**AMBER RED (AR)**  
Some evidence that the Activity has played a role in building system capacity, but **not consistently or in a way that was sustainable** beyond the life of the Activity

**AMBER GREEN (AG)**  
Significant evidence that the Activity has built system capacity in meaningful ways, even if this was **not always consistent or sustainable** beyond the life of the Activity

**GREEN (G)**  
Strong evidence that the Activity has built sustainable capacity, strengthening the system's ability to deliver improved outcomes for students **beyond the life of the Activity**

**Note: Some Activities have been rated together because they built on each other as part of a continuous sequence of support.** The ratings given reflect the cumulative progress made since the beginning of the first Activity. The Activities in question, which are explored in more detail as case studies in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 of the Report, are ACR, ACL and IPEA in Cambodia; EGRP I and EGRP II in Nepal; and Basa Pilipinas and ABC+ in Philippines.



# For some elements of capacity we saw widespread impact...

1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR
AG	G	AG	G	AR	G	AR	AG	AG	AR
AG	AG	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AG	AR	R
R	AR	AG	AG	AR	AG	AG	AG	AR	AR
R	AR	R	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG
G	AG	AR	AG	AR	AR	AG	AG	AR	AR
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AG	R	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AG
	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AG	AG	R	R
AG	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	AG
G	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	R	AG	AG	AG
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	R	R	AR	AR	R

We saw particularly strong impact on education systems' capacity to:

- Design evidence-based reading **reform strategies**
- Gather better **student outcome data**
- Strengthen **teacher development**

# But there were also elements where the Activities made less progress in building system capacity...

1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR
AG	G	AG	G	AR	G	AR	AG	AG	AR
AG	AG	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AG	AR	R
R	AR	AG	AG	AR	AG	AG	AG	AR	AR
R	AR	R	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG
G	AG	AR	AG	AR	AR	AG	AG	AR	AR
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AG	R	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AG
	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AG	AG	R	R
AG	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	AG
G	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	R	AG	AG	AG
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	R	R	AR	AR	R

Activities were less likely to have succeeded in supporting systems to:

- Use data to **review progress and solve problems**
- Regularly and deliberately **review their existing capacity** to drive delivery
- Leverage **educational technology** and address the digital divide

# And for other elements of capacity the picture was mixed

1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR
AG	G	AG	G	AR	G	AR	AG	AG	AR
AG	AG	AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AG	AR	R
R	AR	AG	AG	AR	AG	AG	AG	AR	AR
R	AR	R	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG
G	AG	AR	AG	AR	AR	AG	AG	AR	AR
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AG	R	AR	R	AR	AR	AG	AR	AG
	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AG	AG	R	R
AG	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	AG
G	AG	AG	AG	AR	G	AR	AG	AR	G
AR	AR	AR	AG	AR	AR	R	AG	AG	AG
AR	AR	AR	AR	R	R	R	AR	AR	R

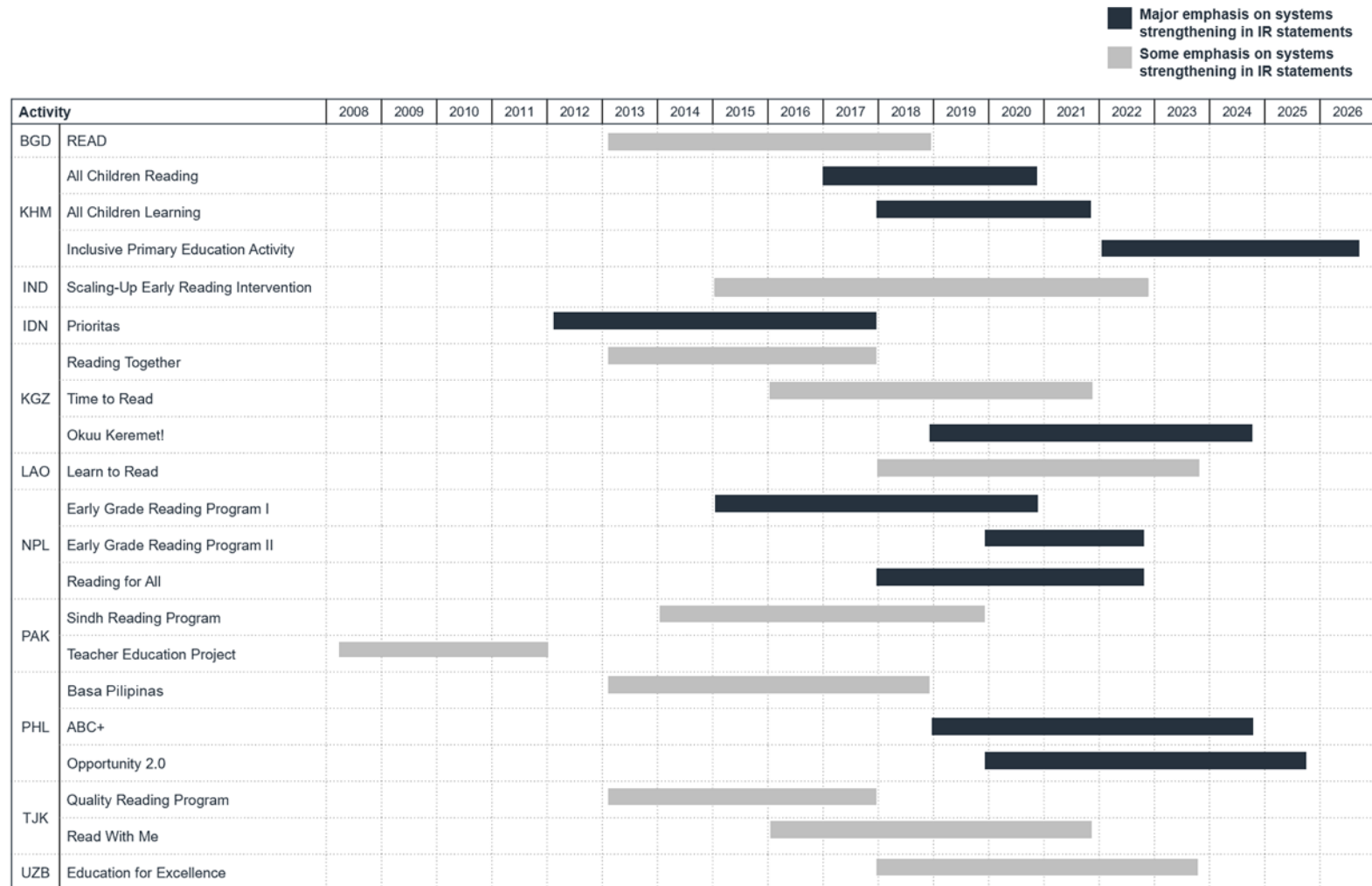
Activities had mixed success in supporting systems to:

- Set **outcome goals** for students
- Analyze the “**delivery chain**”
- Identify, cultivate and maintain key **stakeholder relationships**
- Center **equity and inclusive learning**

# — Key Findings: Conditions for success



# More explicit focus on systems strengthening was linked to greater impact (1/3)



# More explicit focus on systems strengthening was linked to greater impact (2/3)

• Activity stated aims directly aligned with analysis framework

○ Activity stated aims indirectly aligned with analysis framework

		1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
		A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
BGD	READ		○		○		○		•	•	
	All Children Reading		•				•		•		
KHM	All Children Learning		•		○	•	•		•		•
	Inclusive Primary Education Activity					•	•		•		•
IND	Scaling-Up Early Reading Intervention*										
IDN	Prioritas						•		•		
	Reading Together								•		
KGZ	Time to Read		•		○		•			•	
	Okuu Keremet!		•				○				
LAO	Learn to Read		•				○		•		•
	Early Grade Reading Program I		•		○		○		•		
NPL	Early Grade Reading Program II		•		○	○			•		•
	Reading for All		•						•	•	•
PAK	Sindh Reading Program		•		○		•		•		
	Teacher Education Project		•						•		
	Basa Pilipinas		•		○		○		•	•	
PHL	ABC+		•				•		•	•	
	Opportunity 2.0		•			•	•		•		•
	Quality Reading Program				•		○		•		
TJK	Read With Me		•		•		○		•		
UZB	Education for Excellence		○	○					•	•	

\*We did not find a Results Framework for SERI comparable to other Activities

# More explicit focus on systems strengthening was linked to greater impact (3/3)

- Activity stated aims directly aligned with Analysis Framework
- Activity stated aims indirectly aligned with Analysis Framework

		1. Set Goals and Reform Strategy			2. Drive Delivery			3. Create an Improvement Culture			
		A. Define Clear Goals	B. Determine the Reform Strategy	C. Visualize the Delivery Chain	A. Use Data Effectively	B. Monitor Performance and Solve Problems	C. Harness the Power of Relationships	A. Review Capacity to Deliver	B. Build System Capacity All the Time	C. Leverage Educational Technology	D. Promote Equity and Inclusion
BGD	READ		○		○		○		●	●	
	All Children Reading		●				●		●		
KHM	All Children Learning		●		○	●	●		●		●
	Inclusive Primary Education Activity					●	●		●		●
IDN	Prioritas						●		●		
LAO	Learn to Read		●				○		●		●
	Early Grade Reading Program I		●		○		○		●		
NPL	Early Grade Reading Program II		●		○	○			●		●
	Reading for All		●						●	●	●
	Sindh Reading Program		●		○		●		●		
PAK	Teacher Education Project		●						●		
	ABC+		●				●		●	●	
PHL	Basa Pilipinas		●		○		○		●	●	
	Opportunity 2.0		●			●	●		●		●
TJK	Read With Me		●		●		○		●		
UZB	Education for Excellence		○	○					●	●	

## Ratings Key



**Limited/no evidence** of systems strengthening or increased system capacity



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**Significant evidence** that the Activity has built system capacity in meaningful ways, even if this was **not always consistent or sustainable** beyond the life of the Activity



**Strong evidence** that the Activity has built sustainable capacity, strengthening the system's ability to deliver improved outcomes for students **beyond the life of the Activity**

# Activities were more likely to have impact when they intentionally created alignment with the system

We saw the most impact on system capacity where:

- Government leaders **understood from the outset** that systems strengthening was part of the purpose of the Activity
- Activities aligned with **existing government priorities**
- Senior government leaders were **leveraged as champions**
- Activities “**met systems where they were at**” (scope vs. maturity)
- The desired “**journey of system strengthening**” was understood by everyone (roles, responsibilities and timelines; “I do, we do, you do”)

# It pays to be persistent!

**Activities tended to have more impact when they were part of a sequence of Activities which built on each other over several years**

Deep-dive cases studies examined in the Review:



**Cambodia**

**All Children Reading  
(ACR)**  
2017-2020

**All Children  
Learning (ACL)**  
2018-2021

**Inclusive Primary  
Education  
Activity (IPEA)**  
2022-2026



**Nepal**

**Early Grade Reading  
Program I**  
2015-2020

**Early Grade  
Reading Program  
II**  
2020-2022



**Philippines**

**Basa Pilipinas**  
2013-2018

**Advancing Basic  
Education  
(ABC+)**  
2019-2024



# — Recommendations for future USAID Activities

# The Systems Strengthening Review identified some key lessons to inform program design and delivery

## Be explicit

- **Clear, specific, shared objectives** at the outset
- Measure **outcomes not outputs**
- Assess progress with **common tools/frameworks** that create a shared language

## Plot out the journey

- Specify strategies to build capacity and **how roles will change over time** – “I do, we do, you do”
- Define how **progress will be measured**
- **Align with system leaders** on commitment required

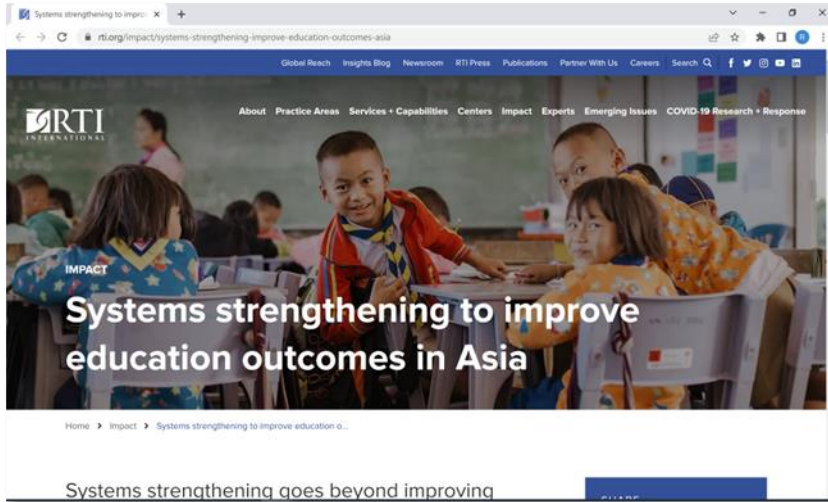
## Meet systems where they are

- Use baseline assessments to meet systems at their **current level of maturity** and set a realistic scope
- Complement **existing system priorities** and donor efforts
- Consider investing in **longer or multi-phase** Activities

## Consider all elements of system capacity

- **Mainstream equity** in Activity design
- Incorporate **EdTech** based on ecosystem maturity
- Help governments: set **goals**; analyze **delivery chains**; hold regular **problem-solving routines**; review their **own capacity**

# All the resources from the Systems Strengthening Review can be found online



Scan here:



From the landing page you can:

- Download the **full report**
- Download a **summary report**
- Download the **Analysis Framework** rubric
- Read a **blog** about our deep-dive case studies
- Download the full text of the **case studies**

Or go to:

[\*\*tinyurl.com/USAIDSSR\*\*](https://tinyurl.com/USAIDSSR)