

CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

Objective: The objective of this component is to analyze the context in which the system of focus exists. We want to identify the ingredients for systems change to occur by answering the following question - *What about the context tells you that this is a good idea?*

Overview: Systems change doesn't happen in a vacuum—we don't create it from 'scratch' - it builds on the existing conditions and dynamics of a system. Context provides us essential ingredients of change. To drive change, we need to understand the current environment, how and why it came to be, and to explore which conditions are likely to constrain and enable the change process.

- **Look backward to look forward:** Context involves understanding both the current state of the system and how (and why) it has evolved over time.¹ Looking at what has changed, and what has not, can help us appreciate how the system works.
- **Consider internal and external:** Context considers not only the broader environment, but also how the system responds to its environment - to figure out internal dynamics (think of culture, norms, power dynamics, and patterns of behavior) that influence its capacity for change.²
- Consider the project context: Projects are part of this context, and the conditions we (and past programs) help create play a crucial role in driving (or limiting) change.

Framing:

Driving meaningful systems change requires focusing on what is possible rather than being constrained by limitations. By examining where change is occurring, where resistance exists, and where opportunities are emerging, we can uncover leverage points for impactful and transformative action.

What is changing?

¹ There is an exercise with the Institute for the Future. (n.d.). *Looking Backward to Look Forward: A foresight methodology*. Retrieved from <https://www.iftf.org> that may be useful for your team to use.

² The multi-level perspective is another tool for exploring context, specifically looking at what environmental trends create windows of opportunity, how might the system respond and what innovations at the niche have potential to shift the current regime. School of System Change. (2020). *Stories of change: Multi-level perspective*. <https://schoolofsystemchange.org/systems-change/field-and-practice/stories-of-change-multi-level-perspective>

Frequency & Use Case

The context should be defined after the baseline and inception phase analyses and reviewed on an annual basis or right after a large shock to the system (natural disaster or political event). The context section of the worksheet should then become the introduction and background section used in project reporting or to set the stage for a communication story. Documenting changes to the context over the life of the project also help explain why a project may not have achieved certain outcomes or targets.

Change that is already happening in a system often reveals where we might find leverage. These can appear as **bright spots** from small, gradual shifts that, over time, build momentum and lead to significant progress. On the other hand, more disruptive changes—like policy reforms, market shifts, or social movements—can have **ripple effects** that also create openings for new ideas, actors, and practices to take root and grow.

- **Bright Spots:** These are examples of progress or innovations that show positive results and attract attention from others. They can often be expanded upon or adapted to create a impact and encourage further change.
- **Ripple Effects:** These are the wider impacts of a change, spreading beyond the initial change, to influence other parts of the system. Ripple effects create new opportunities and lead to larger changes across different parts of the system.

What is stuck?

Recognizing what is resistant or slow to change is just as important as identifying progress.

Frozen areas remain entrenched for long periods, highlighting the barriers that keep the status quo in place. However, if **pent-up energy**, if given the right conditions can trigger sudden shifts in the system.

- **Frozen Areas:** Deeply entrenched parts of the system where change is slow or unlikely in the near term. These areas often define the status quo.
- **Pent-up Energy:** Growing pressure or frustration within the system that, if unleashed, could disrupt the status quo and catalyze a broader transformation.

What is uncertain?

By examining what is changing, what is stuck, and where energy and momentum exist, you can uncover system dynamics and identify leverage points. However, there is often uncertainty, contradiction and ambiguity, where there is both potential and resistance to change, which may hold hidden opportunities for us to learn and explore.

- **Mixed bags** are complex zones within a system where progress and resistance coexist, often creating tension and competing dynamics. While these areas can be challenging to navigate, they can present unconventional pathways for change.

Energy of Change	Pent-Up Energy: Areas of resistance where pressure or frustration is building, with potential for breakthroughs if tapped.	Mixed Bag: Complex zones where progress and resistance coexist, creating tension. These contradictions can offer unique insights or unconventional pathways for change.	Bright Spots: Active areas of progress or innovation that can be scaled or leveraged to accelerate change.
	Frozen: Deeply entrenched parts of the system unlikely to shift in the near term, defining the status quo.		Ripple Effects: Slow or emerging changes that have yet to gain visibility but could influence the system over time.
Momentum of Change			

How to Act Intentionally to Leverage System Dynamics

1. **Start with the Bright Spots:** Focus on areas where momentum and energy for change already exist. These are great starting points to build trust, gain support, and establish credibility for tackling more complex challenges.
2. **Find where Energy and Momentum Connect:** Look for areas where the pent-up energy of actors in the system and momentum from ripple effects from other changes intersect around new causes. These are ideal areas for testing different strategies to try and unlock the system's broader potential for change.
3. **Look for Thawing:** Even entrenched, "frozen" issues can "thaw" as the broader system changes. Watch for small cracks or "chips in the ice" that signal opportunities for change, often fueled by shifts in other parts of the system.
4. **In Mixed Areas, Reframe Our Understanding:** Look at areas where progress and resistance exist together. These tensions can challenge assumptions and uncover new insights. Letting go of preconceived ideas can reveal innovative ways to intervene.

Below is an illustrative example of the USAID Transforming Market Systems (TMS) Activity's *Context for Change* framework for the tourism system. In this framework:

- **Energy** refers to the degree to which actors engage, advocate, and push for change.
- **Momentum** reflects the progress of change already underway within the system.

Together, these dimensions highlight the dynamics between potential (energy) and progress (momentum) in driving systemic transformation.

Energy of Change	Pent-Up Energy (Low Momentum, High Energy):		Bright Spots (High Momentum, High Energy):
	<p><u>Social Norm Shifts:</u> Increasing numbers of women entering the workforce are challenging traditional norms and advocating for stronger gender and inclusion practices. These shifts could foster diversity but also position businesses to attract female tourists.</p> <p><u>Strategic Investments:</u> Public budget constraints have forced agencies like the IHT to prioritize high-impact investments. This creates an opportunity for more intentional resource allocation that could target areas with the highest potential for growth and systemic impact.</p>	Mixed Bag (Low/High Momentum and Energy):	<p><u>Digitalization in Tourism:</u> The growing digitization of tourism enables companies to capitalize on user-generated content (such as reviews and social media posts), significantly enhancing the visibility and reputation of Honduras as a destination.</p> <p><u>Emerging Models:</u> Examples like Santa Rosa de Copán showcase gradual progress toward greater collaboration, providing tangible evidence of the potential for destination-based tourism management models that can be scaled or replicated elsewhere.</p>
	Frozen (Low Momentum, Low Energy):		Ripple Effects (High Momentum, Low Energy):
	<p><u>Bureaucratic Resistance:</u> Government budget decisions limit investment in tourism promotion and marginalize private sector input. National institutions remain resistant to reform and skeptical of private sector collaboration, maintaining the status quo.</p> <p><u>Traditional Business Models:</u> Many small, family-owned tourism businesses are reluctant or unable to adopt digital tools or improve their services for international tourists, further entrenching their limited competitiveness in global markets.</p>	Narrow Private Sector Focus:	<p><u>Improved Connectivity:</u> Incremental improvements in air connections between Honduras and key U.S. markets reflect growing demand. However, without an incentive framework, the full potential for increased connectivity and spillover effects remains untapped.</p> <p><u>Local Governance and Collaboration:</u> Local governments are increasingly engaged in tourism development. However, a lack of clear investment priorities offers an opportunity to introduce public-private engagement models to guide their efforts.</p>
		Recurrent Crises:	
		<p>Frequent disruptions, such as political instability, have challenged the sector but also prompted the public and private sectors to collaborate in new ways. These crises highlight opportunities for more sustained and strategic partnerships in the future.</p>	
		Momentum of Change	

Process & Facilitation Guide: Below is a recommended process and facilitation guide to develop the Context for Change component as part of an in-person workshop. Note, it is not the only way and can be adapted as needed.

Timing: The initial process may take approximately 60 - 90 minutes in the workshop, particularly to identify the project's "windows of opportunity." However, once initially completed, it should be regularly revisited (at minimum, semi-annually). These follow-ups can take 15-30 minutes and incorporate new insights on changes in context in the system.

Participants: Gather input from a wide group of participants'. At minimum, the technical team should participate, but other outside experts and stakeholders (local partners, donors, or private sector representatives) can provide valuable insights. It is recommended that Technical Team Lead assign a team member to update the systems context regularly, for example during/after Pause and Reflect (P&R) sessions or following assessments.

Materials: Use the Systems Change Outcome Map (printed on a poster) and provide sticky notes and pens/markers for participants to capture ideas.

Preparation: Facilitator(s) may want to request participants to review summaries of baseline/formative assessments and for technical staff to review latest publications/data related to the sector/stakeholder/intervention prior to the workshop. Sometimes context changes, however, are more subtle. Field diaries or notes on observations or 'aha' moments are sources of insights.

Step 1. Introduce the Context for Change

Start by introducing the Context for Change component on the Systems Change Outcome Map. A simple analogy is to think of your Vision for Change as creating a memorable meal. Before cooking, you need to assess what ingredients you have— and the tools in your kitchen. You also need to consider external factors, like time, guest preferences, and space limitations. Some ingredients will fit perfectly, while others may require you to adjust the recipe. Similarly, understanding the Context for Change helps you identify what's available, what's missing, and where adjustments are needed to achieve the best outcome.

Step 2: Facilitation - Changes and Constants

This method focuses on examining changes and constants within the system over time to identify opportunities and barriers for action.

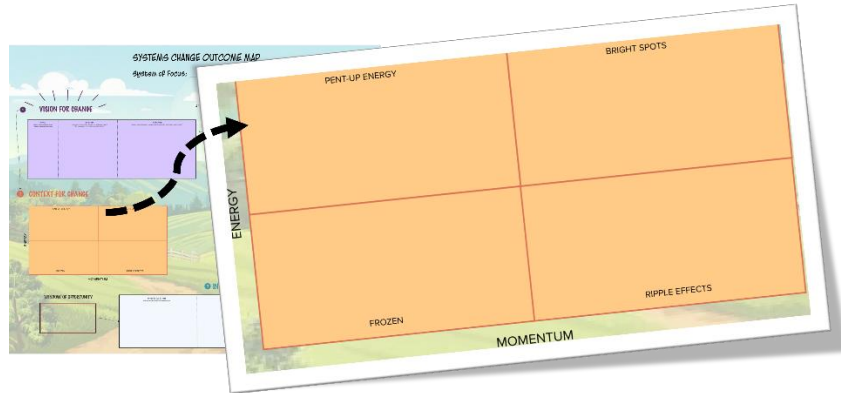
Framing the Discussion

Use these key questions to guide the team:

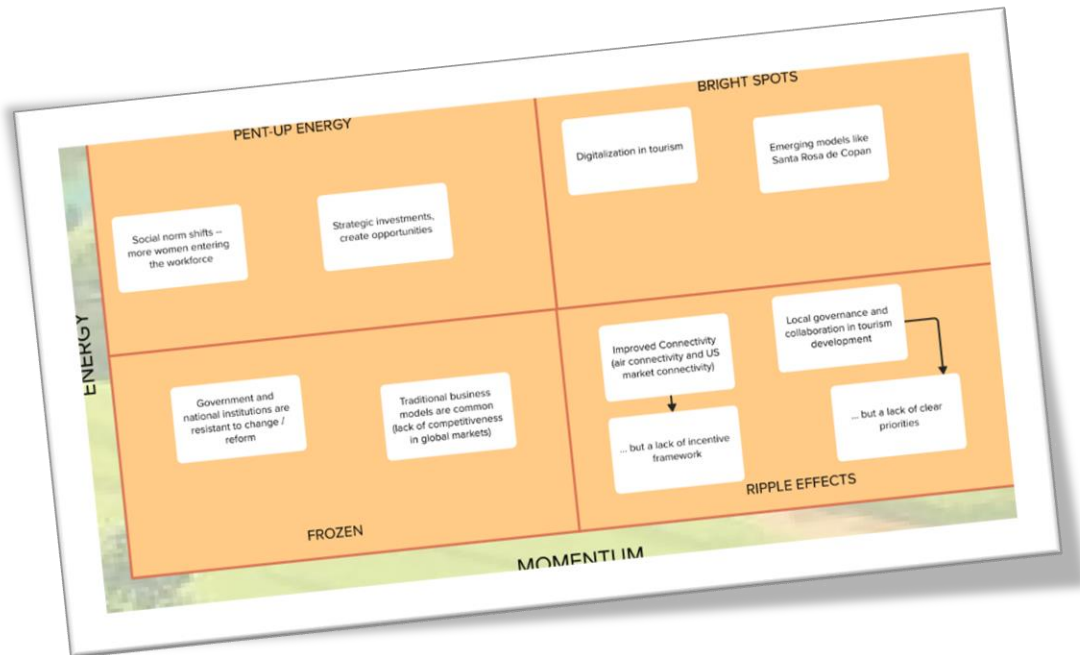
- What has changed in this system over the last 10 years? How and why did it change?
- What has remained constant or stuck during this time? Why?
- What issues are actors highly motivated to solve?
- What issues are important but tend to be ignored? Why?

(Tip: Focus on identifying the drivers behind change and why certain areas remain entrenched. Consider who is motivated to change and who is not.)

Using the Map



- Ask participants to write their ideas on sticky notes. Provide the following directions:
 - Place changes with both energy and momentum in the top right (bright spots)
 - Place changes with momentum but no energy in the bottom right (ripple effects)
 - Place constants with energy but no momentum in top left (pent-up energy)
 - Place constants with no energy or momentum in bottom left (frozen)
- Group similar sticky notes together and look for contradictions or ambiguities. Use these as opportunities to ask deeper questions and refine the team's understanding.
- Using the Honduras tourism sector example above, a completed Context for Change on the poster may look something like this:



Additional Guiding Questions:

- Looking back at the key events or changes have shaped this system over the past decade, Who or what drove these changes? (what can we learn from the past)
- What untapped potential do we see drive significant change in the future?
- How do relationships between actors influence how the system works?
- Who are the key actors driving or resisting change, and what are their motivations?
- What trends or changes on the horizon could impact the system?
- What broader systems (e.g., regulatory, economic) influence this system?

Lens-Specific Questions:



Fair Societies:

- Does the system work differently for specific groups, like women or youth?
- How have these differences changed over time?
- What barriers prevent certain groups from fully benefiting or participating?



Resilient Communities:

- What makes the system more vulnerable to shocks or risks?
- How effectively does the system respond to shocks (adapting, absorbing, etc.)?

- *How proactive are different stakeholders in managing risks?*



Thriving Economies:

- *How does the system support job creation, income growth, or entrepreneurship?*
- *What are the binding constraints to private investment and economic growth?*
- *How conducive is the business environment for private sector development?*



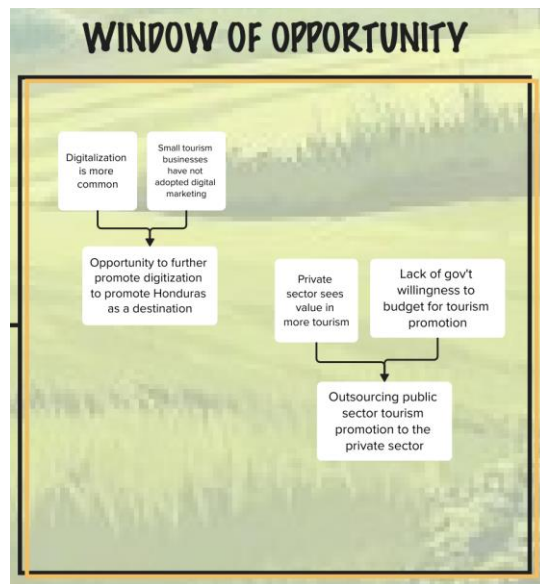
Sustainable Food Systems:

- *Does the system ensure people have access to affordable, nutritious food?*
- *Where are the biggest inefficiencies in producing or distributing food?*
- *Are current practices sustainable, or do they risk harming the environment?*

Step 3: Identifying Opportunities and Entry Points

1. Group Key Changes and Constants:

- Guide the team to group the key changes (bright spots and ripple effects) and constants (pent-up energy and frozen or stuck areas).
- Facilitate a discussion on how these elements, when combined, create windows of opportunity or entry points to influence the system.
- Record these insights in the *Window of Opportunity* section on the map, such as below:



2. Explore Unknowns and Contradictions in the Mixed Bag:

- Ask the team to identify contradictions or uncertainties in the "Mixed Bag" section, where progress and resistance seem to exist at the same time.
- Facilitate a discussion:

- *Are there gaps in our understanding?*
- *Do these contradictions challenge how we frame the problem?*
- Encourage the team to consider whether reframing the problem could open new pathways for action.

3. **Optional Question to Explore Constraints:**

- *Ask: Are there any conditions, like funding, time, or partnerships, that limit our ability to influence the system?*

3. Be sure that at some point after the Context for Change is developed, this is put into the Word document worksheet. It is important to capture this narrative. Someone from the technical team should triangulate the statements with supporting evidence from news articles, research articles, or other recorded stakeholder observations, to note that evidence exists to support the assumptions included. It will make reporting easier for project teams, and it also will provide common language that can be used for internal and external communication (including to the donor). (See the Guide Overview for more detail.)

Tips & Additional Resources:

- **Pay Attention to Signals:** Oftentimes, the signs of a context change aren't obvious, so it's important to pay attention to 'weak' signals or emerging patterns that tell us that the system might be heading in a certain direction. If we can anticipate, we can be more proactive in our design of context-relevant interventions.
- **Consider Internal and External:** Analyze both internal (e.g., culture, incentives, social norms) and external (e.g., market trends, regulatory changes) factors and dynamics. Refer to ACDI/VOCA's [Market Intelligence tools](#).
- **Discuss Implications for Change:** Don't just describe the context, explain how these contextual conditions enable or constrain possibilities for change.
- **Use Data and Evidence:** Support your contextual analysis with evidence, including secondary data, to validate your understanding and strengthen your argument.
- **Continuously Update:** Context is dynamic. Reassess and update your contextual understanding, especially risks or key indicators that signal shifts in the environment.
- **Monitor Risks and Indicators:** Use sentinel indicators—these are early warning signs that signal changes or emerging risks that could impact planned interventions. For example, understanding potential unintended outcomes such as increased gender based violence from women's economic empowerment outcomes. Sentinel indicators should be developed with the MEL Team and tracked along with systems change indicators in the evidence section. See ACDI/VOCA's TWP Toolkit for tools and guidance on scenario planning and TWP journaling practices that support context monitoring and planning.
- **Contract with a Local Research Partner to Monitor the Context:** Consider hiring a local research or think tank to help with context monitoring. This could be the same

firm hired to conduct inception phase analyses that continues to monitor and provide context updates to the project team and partners to inform decision making.

- **Communicate Context Changes to Partners:** When possible, communicate sentinel indicators and context changes to partners so that they are better able to identify and manage current and future risks.
- **Context Analysis Template** - ACDI/VOCA's USAID/Mozambique Resiliência Integrada na Nutrição e Agricultura (RESINA) Activity used the following context analysis [template](#) to analyze the systems change context across a range of dimensions.