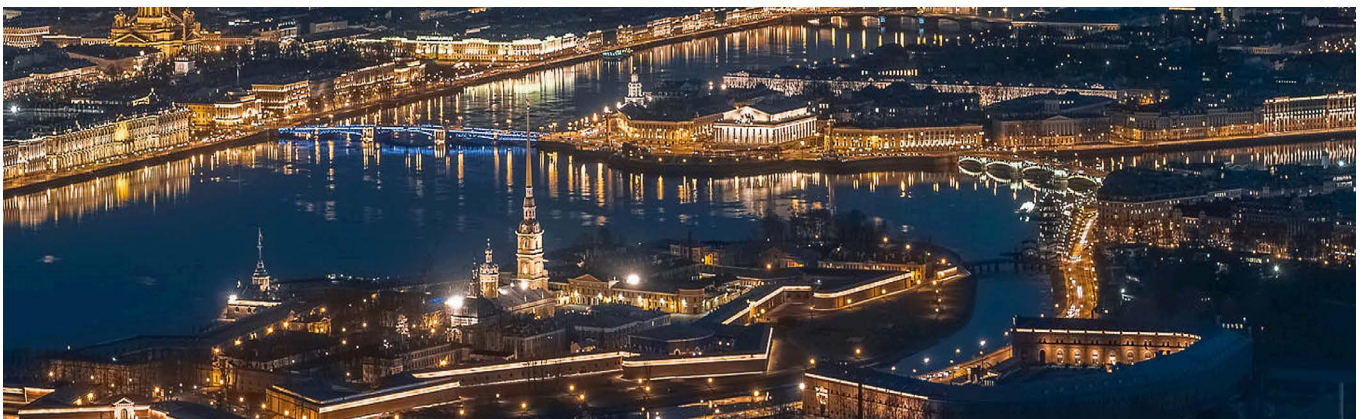


Insight Brief: Critical Systems Thinking

Critical systems thinking involves understanding the complex causal relationships and feedback loops within and between systems, including understanding actor relationships.

✓ Key aspects of Critical Systems Thinking

- **Interconnectedness:** Recognizing the dynamic and interdependent relationships within a system and highlights how changes in one part affect the whole, necessitating a holistic approach that incorporates multiple perspectives and contexts.
- **Synthesis:** Combining different elements to create something new, as opposed to analysis which breaks things down.
- **Emergence:** Examining how complex systems or larger structures arise from the interactions and relationships of smaller, individual components.
- **Feedback loops:** Observing and intervening in the constant flows between elements of a system.
- **Causality:** Gaining perspective on how one thing results in another within a dynamic system.
- **Systems mapping:** Identifying and mapping elements within a system to understand their relationships.
- **Probing questions:** Unlike conventional problem-solving approaches that might focus on optimizing one part of a system, critical systems thinking asks: Whose voices are included or excluded? What assumptions shape our understanding of the problem? How do power dynamics influence potential solutions?
- **Developing experience:** Strengthening critical systems thinking takes practice in real-life challenges.



Transformative skills and capacities are increasingly needed to address complex challenges and reshape our organisations and societies to respond to climate change and engage with sustainable development. The Inner Development Goals highlight the role of inner capacities for transformation and the need to link inner and outer transformation. Building from the Inner Development Goals of **BEING, THINKING, RELATING, COLLABORATING** and **ACTING**, we propose a fundamental and interconnected set of transformative skills and capacities.

“THINKING - Developing our cognitive skills by taking different perspectives, evaluating information and making sense of the world as an interconnected whole, is essential for wise decision-making.” – Inner Development Goal.

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Developing Critical Systems Thinking

If you are looking to develop Critical Systems Thinking, here are a few practices you can try to kick-start your journey.

- **Explore:** This involves thoroughly examining the complex situation, gathering relevant information, and identifying key stakeholders and their perspectives.
- **Understand:** This involves thoroughly examining the complex situation, gathering relevant information, and identifying key stakeholders and their perspectives.
- **Intervene:** This focuses on implementing the chosen solution or strategy, taking into account potential risks and rewards.
- **Check:** This involves monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the implemented decision, allowing for adjustments as needed.

Benefits of Critical Systems Thinking

- **Embracing complex challenges:** Provides tools to address “wicked problems” like climate change, which are characterized by ambiguity and conflicting interests.
- **Critical reflexivity:** Practitioners are encouraged to critically reflect on their own assumptions, values, and methodologies, fostering continuous learning in addressing complex issues.
- **Methodological pluralism:** It advocates the integration of diverse systems methodologies, enabling practitioners to select and combine approaches that best fit the specific complexities of a situation.
- **Driving sustainable solutions:** Encourages long-term thinking and system-wide interventions, critical for addressing challenges such environmental sustainability.

This insight brief is developed through ChatGPT and Perplexity as well as editing by Lilly Diamant and Kes McCormick. The purpose is to share key insights in a condensed format and spark critical thinking.