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Cross-sectoral partnerships for development & systemic change – beyond buzzwords

Tackling conceptual and methodological limitations of collaborative planning for systemic change through systems ontologies and epistemologies

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Abstract

The Anthropocene is facing complex issues that require paradigmatic shifts in thought and action. In this context, *systemic change* and *cross-sectoral partnerships* have gained an exceptional wave of support through agreements such as Agenda 2030, shaping the landscape of international development cooperation sector. However, conceptual limitations and methodological gaps pose challenges to understanding how cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D) can engage in systemic change through designed interventions. This transdisciplinary research rests on a robust theoretical framework rooted in systems ontologies and epistemologies informed by Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) and the applied systems theory on programme/non-programmed decisions. Informed by existing literature and the empirical data collected through eleven expert interviews, the research introduces a critical discussion on the connection between social systems, systemic change and the challenges experienced by CSP4D as a collaborative form of planning. The research concludes by introducing an adjusted methodological framework on collaborative planning for systemic change, relevant to the context of CSP4D and development cooperation. Findings from this research can benefit the wider community of scholars and practitioners engaged in conceptual or methodological debates on partnerships, and/or systemic change.

Key concepts: systemic change, cross-sectoral partnerships, development cooperation, collaborative action, social systems, complexity, intervention design

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List of Abbreviations

CAS	Complex adaptive systems
CSP(s)	Cross-sectoral partnership(s)
CSP4D(s)	Cross-sectoral partnership(s) for development
HSM	Hard Systems Methodology
SSM	Soft Systems Methodology
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goals(s)

Research Definitions

The definitions below present key concepts of the research. All but the last definition have been constructed to fit the purpose of this research.

Cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D)	Cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D) are bilateral or multilateral collaborations between not-for-profit, public and/or private organisations, who contribute financial resources, capacity, expertise, and/or other resources necessary to achieve common socio-economic or environmental goals, as supported by the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.
(Complex) Social systems	(Complex) social systems are ensembles of structures, processes and agents (sub-systems) that serve a system-specific function/purpose and hold system-specific communication, responding dynamically to changes in the external environment, through learning and adaptation; they can be found in complex, interconnected and interdependent networks.
Systemic change	Systemic change is the process aimed at tackling social or environmental issues existent in the function or the structure of the system, which requires a systemic planning methodology to devise action based on the system's behaviour and the complexity of the problem addressed.

Development intervention	For this research, the subject of CSP4D collaboration, designed to achieve social or environmental development goals, in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.
Development cooperation	"Development is a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development" (United Nations, 1997)

1. Introduction & Background

1.1 The need for systemic change & the call for collaborative action

The last decades of the Anthropocene have marked an era of accentuated human impacts and rise of complex issues, such as climate change (Gaffney and Steffen, 2017), while poverty and inequalities have continued to affect all levels of the society (van Tulder et al., 2016). Aggravated by the VUCA world – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity – complex and wicked societal issues have been characterised by increased uncertainty with regards to their cause-symptom-effect, by unpredictability and dynamic complexity and by increased stakeholder conflicts (Senge et al., 2006; Dentoni et al., 2010).

Responding to these issues require paradigmatic shifts in thought and action and policy coherence (Senge et al., 2006; MacDonald et al., 2018). In this context, linear intervention models (Green, 2016) and silo approaches (MacDonald et al., 2018) are considered unsuitable to address the level of systemic change required. For systemic change to happen, a new leadership is required, where all resources, including various actors are connected and mobilised, effectively being able to tackle complex issues (OECD, 2017); a leadership that has been encouraged to take the form of cross-sectoral partnerships (Abercrombie et al., 2015)

Consequently, the imperative for innovative solutions (Dentoni et al., 2018) and collaborative action for systemic change (van Tulder and Keen, 2018) has seen thousands of partnerships marking the last decades of coordinated efforts, aimed at tackling societal problems considered too great for single-sector organisations to address alone (McQuaid, 2000; Findlay-Books et al., 2007; van Tulder et al., 2016; Stott, 2019). Regarded essential in tackling complex and interconnected social and environmental issues (Findlay-Books et al., 2007; Andrew and Entwistle, 2010; Linnenluecke et al., 2017), cross-sectoral partnerships (CSPs) have been welcomed as catalysts for systemic change (Hebb and Thaker, 2014; Dentoni et al., 2018; van Tulder and Keen, 2018). However, the connection between CSPs and systemic change as an emerging field of study and practice requires more scientific inquiry (Clarke and Crane, 2018).

1.2 Impact on the development cooperation sector

Development cooperation has risen to attend national or international development issues, primarily of less developed countries, seeking no financial gain, while enhancing country

ownership through collaborations (Development Cooperation Forum Secretariat, 2015). Set out by the UN General Assembly, development cooperation is defined as:

> *"Development is a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic development, social development and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development"* (United Nations, 1997).

Partnerships have been recognised as key vehicles in working towards effective development cooperation, alongside inclusivity, country ownership, transparency and accountability (UNDP, 2021). Moreover, the role of partnerships in addressing systemic issues has been acknowledged by the United Nations, through the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and its 17 Goals (Rosa, 2017). The distinct formulation of SDG 17 – Global Partnerships for Sustainable Development – reinforced the need for collaborative action, to strengthen the implementing capacity and the progress towards achieving all other sixteen Goals (United Nations, n.d.). Local, regional, national and international partnerships are formed around common values, seeking to achieve the shared vision of wellbeing for planet and people (United Nations, n.d.). Particularly, targets 17.16 and 17.17 promote multi-stakeholder collaborations between public, private and civil society organisations (Rosa, 2017).

The call for systemic and collaborative action demanded by the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda impacted the architecture of development cooperation (Kharas and Rogerson, 2017). Increasingly, donors and intergovernmental agencies have adopted the complexity and systems theory (OECD, 2017), encouraging collaborations between public and private actors (Abercrombie et al., 2015), such CSPs, which engage in 'beyond-aid' cooperation between state and non-state actors (Gore, 2013). Non-traditional actors such as the business sector have been seen to increasingly engage in partnerships for sustainability, supporting innovation at the level of socio-technical systems (Gaziulusoy and Brezet, 2015). From the standpoint of the development sector, the opportunity of accessing new technologies and financial capital brought in by the business sector has created the ground for new collaborations; a practice welcomed with varying degree of enthusiasm and reservation by the non-profit community (Kharas and Rogerson, 2017).

2. Problem situation: a twofold concern

Despite the shared enthusiasm among scholars and practitioners, the emerging transdisciplinary research on CSPs and their contribution to systemic change is still underdeveloped and fragmented, facing conceptual and methodological challenges (van Tulder et al., 2016; Clarke and Crane, 2018). Thin evidence and empirical challenges clouding both concepts led researchers to warn that partnerships have become the panacea to complex social and environmental issues, calling for a more critical approach (McQuaid, 2000; Findlay-Brooks, 2005; van Tulder et al., 2016). The need for more research is accentuated by alternative streams of literature, which deem CSPs to yield no results in tackling complex issues (Dentoni et al., 2018), on the contrary, being problematised for driving adverse system problems, such as social imbalances and the privatization of development (Clarke and Crane, 2018). This view is rooted in Olson's 'zero contribution thesis', which rejects the idea that collective effort can be mobilised free of self-interest, in favour of the common good (Ostrom, 2000).

The problem addressed by this research is formulated under two major concerns: there is a conceptual and a methodological gap that affect understanding and planning for systemic change, with considerations on the contribution and the challenges of CSPs, as a collaborative form of action. Both issues are discussed in the context of international development cooperation, from the perspective of non-profit organizations.

2.1 Conceptual limitations

In a transdisciplinary literature review of 100 articles on CSPs and systemic change, Clarke and Crane (2018) inform that the concepts of 'systems change', 'systemic change' or 'transformational change' are interchangeably used, contributing to the proliferated understanding of the concept (Clarke and Crane, 2018). Similarly, as a multi-disciplinary and emerging field, the literature reveals the concepts of 'cross-sectoral partnerships', 'multi-stakeholder partnerships' or 'private-public partnerships' interchangeably used, causing a blurred conceptual distinction, and contributing to the poor understanding of the phenomenon (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Clarke and Crane, 2018). As the literature informs, conceptual limitations affect the understanding of systemic change and the role of CSP therein, bearing implications on the methodology of planning (van Tulder et al., 2016).

2.2 Methodological limitations

The research introduces that the methodological limitations affecting collaborative planning for systemic change are accentuated by the reduced understanding of the challenges experienced by CSPs in planning for systemic change. As informed by a study on 45 organisations, there is little evidence on CSPs and their challenges, an issue that can be attributed to the sporadic and inconsistent employment of evaluation methods across the development sector (Hebb and Thaker, 2014). While formal evaluation methods are increasingly employed in the non-profit sector, they are often completely absent in the case of smaller NGOs (Hebb and Thaker, 2014). Understanding how CSPs contribute to systemic change is also challenged by existing evaluation models that primarily focus on outputs, outcomes and impacts over time (van Tulder et al., 2016; Stadtler, 2016), a 'hard outcomes' approach vulnerable to methodological problems of source bias (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010). It is also considered that the complex governing system of the CSPs (McQuaid, 2000), and the complexity of planning for systemic change (van Tulder and Keen, 2018) limit understanding on the effectiveness, efficiency and equitability of CSPs in planning for systemic change (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010; Clarke and Crane, 2018).

In conclusion, the conceptual diffuseness associated with systemic change and the knowledge gap on CSPs' contribution and challenges in planning for systemic change, create a blind spot for the methodology of collaborative planning for systemic change. More research is necessary to grasp conceptual and methodological implications associated with systemic change, CSP and intervention design in the context of development cooperation.

3. Research purpose & research questions

3.1 Research Purpose

Based on the two gaps addressed, the research brings a twofold contribution. Firstly, the research tackles the conceptual challenges of systemic change, by reviewing existing literature and introducing systems ontologies and epistemologies to define systemic change, connected to complex social systems. By introducing systems ontologies and epistemologies, the research aims at discussing how conceptual understanding of systemic change affects the methodology of planning. Moreover, informed by the available definitions and their formation rationale, the research defines the concept of cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D), created to fit the empirical context of development cooperation relevant to this research.

Secondly, the research aims at addressing the methodological limitations on planning for systemic change in the context of collaborative planning. This is done by employing systems ontologies and epistemologies to help identify methodological dimensions of intervention design and to understand the challenges experienced by CSP4D in this context. The research concludes by proposing a revised methodology of planning for systemic change, adapted to the collaborative planning context of CSP4D.

Together, the two streams of inquiry create a better understanding of how CSP4Ds can contribute to systemic change through designed interventions: a critical reflection on conceptual and methodological challenges and opportunities for CSP4D to address systemic change in the context of international development cooperation.

3.2 Research Questions

The study aims at answering one main research question, supported by four sub-research questions, relevant to the conceptual and methodological contribution of the research, as shown in Table 1.

Main RQ
How can CSP4D better design development interventions that support systemic change in the context of international development cooperation?
Research contribution 1: addressing the conceptual gap
Sub-RQ 1

How does conceptual understanding of systemic change affect the methodology of planning for systemic change?
Research contribution 2: addressing the planning methodology gap
Sub-RQ 2
What challenges do CSP4Ds experience as a collaborative form of planning when designing interventions for systemic change?
Sub-RQ 3
Why do CSP4D experience these challenges in planning for systemic change?
Sub-RQ 4
How can a systemic planning methodology be improved to fit the collaborative planning context of CSP4Ds?

Table 1. Research Questions

4. Literature Review

The transdisciplinary literature review introduces conceptual considerations for both systemic change and CSPs, methodological considerations on planning for systemic change and challenges experiences by CSPs as collaborative forms of action.

4.1 Literature on systemic change

4.1.1 Conceptual considerations

Clarke and Crane (2018) inform that when subject to purposeful intervention, systems change is defined as a transformation in a system's function, policy, or institutional structure. To this, Lomax (2019) contributes that change can be enacted by modifying the current functions of the system or through the emergence of new functions. Finally, systemic change has been defined as making an improvement of environmental or social nature to the system, in order to tackle or eradicate problems such as poverty or food supply (Senge et al., 2006).

According to Clarke and Crane (2018), systemic change can be studied in connection to the actors involved, the measurable impact on the issue and its environment or by studying the boundaries of change, as seen in Figure 1. Alternatively, systems change can be defined and analysed based on three stances: the measurable change observed in the system state, the process of adaptation and resilience experienced by the system and lastly, the process of inducing change and the intervention that can be linked to it (Lomax, 2019). The different conceptual considerations are presented in Table 2.

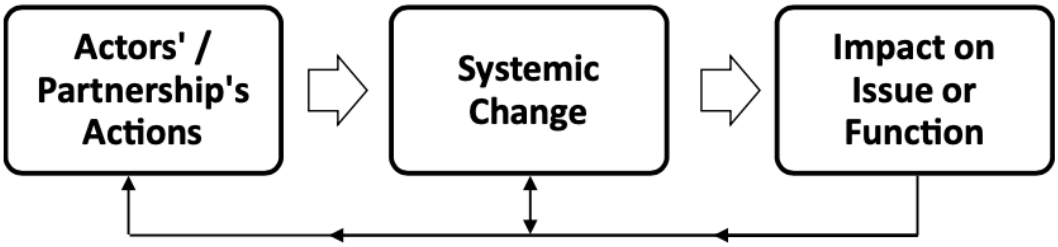


Figure 1. Systemic change process (Clarke and Crane, 2018)

Author	Conceptual considerations						
	Modify the system's function/ structure	Address social-environmental issues	Process of change	Boundaries of change	Actors involved	Impact on issue/ change	System adaptation/ resilience
Clarke and Crane (2018)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lomax (2019)	✓		✓			✓	
Senge et al. (2006)		✓					

Table 2. Conceptual considerations for systemic change

4.1.2 Methodological considerations

Perceiving the world as a connected and dynamic network of systems, has influenced the methodological discussion on planning for systemic change. Management and organizational studies mention systemic thinking as a way to understand and plan according to the nature of systems and its requirements for systemic change (Quarshie and Leuschner, 2018). Similarly, according to Green (2016) and the Power-Systems Approach, change rests on the ability to understand the complexity of social systems, which informs the methodology of the development intervention. Given the interconnectedness of political, economic and development systems, Green (2016) mentions the importance of experiment-based approaches, of learning and accept change as a process, as well as the ability to apply systems thinking. Further on connecting complexity to the planning methodology, Tudler and Keen (2018) introduce the complexity alignment framework for Theories of Change (ToC). Cross-cutting three variables – complexity of the issue, partnership configuration and the learning strategy – the framework stresses the need for contextual adaptability and designing complexity-sensitive interventions (Tudler and Keen, 2018).

Moreover, the transdisciplinary literature reflects on collaborative approaches as fundamental to systemic change. Change in the context of complex systems and complex socio-environmental issues is seen to rest on the transformative power of coordinated action and consensus building (Linnenluecke et al., 2017; Tudler and Keen, 2018). Building momentum

by engaging in collaborative work, leveraging resources, distributing leadership and creating a climate for learning have also been considered as suitable practices in planning for systemic change (Abercrombie et al., 2015). In line, Green (2016) introduces the concept of 'power with', activated through collaborative action, underpinning partnerships to the process of systemic change. The literature reflects on the need to integrate learning, regulation, interconnection and re-engineering models in order to achieve macro-level systemic change (Quarshie and Leuschner, 2018) and the long-term potential effect of CSPs (Tulder et al., 2016)

Finally, some research introduces systemic change and deep equity as co-dependent, with implications on planning for systemic change. Without equity in the process, systemic change is seen as dangerous and bearing harmful effects, at the same time, deep equity cannot be achieved without systemic change (Petty and Leach, 2020). Similarly, Green (2016) introduces systemic change in connection to power, inferring that change cannot be enacted in a power vacuum. Green (2016) informs of three forms of external power that can affect the course of change: the visible power, the hidden and the invisible power. As such, systems change requires a rigorous power analysis and the ability to identify and analyse the power dynamics that can affect the outcome of an intervention (Green, 2016). The different methodological considerations are reviewed in Table 3.

Author	**Methodological considerations**						
	Systemic thinking	Collaborative approaches	Learning	Experiment-based	Power & Equity	Complexity sensitive, adaptive planning	Reengineering models
Quarshire and Leuschner (2018)	✓	✓	✓				✓
Abercrombie et al. (2015)		✓	✓				
Green (2016)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Petty and Leach (2020)					✓		

Linnenluecke et al. (2017)		✓				✓	
Tudler and Keen, (2018)		✓	✓			✓	

Table 3. Methodological considerations

4.2 Literature on CSPs

4.2.1 Conceptual considerations

Becker and Smith (2018: 5) define CSPs as:

> *"alliances of individuals and organizations from the nonprofit, government, philanthropic, and business sectors that use their diverse perspectives and resources to jointly solve a societal problem and achieve a shared goal"* (Becker and Smith 2018: 5)

However, the literature on partnerships presents several variations sprung from the concept of CSP. Relevant variations are introduced below. Differentiated by an increased attention to issue crystallisation and collaborative purpose, cross-sectoral social partnerships (CSSP) emerged as bilateral or multilateral collaborations between not-for-profit, public and/or private actors, joined to address social, environmental or economic issues, through short or long-term interventions (Selsky and Parker, 2005). Similarly, public-private partnerships for development are defined as collaborative arrangements between different actors, motivated by a need to respond to societal problems and to address communities living in a state of marginalisation (Stadtler, 2016). Despite terminological variance, these forms of partnerships draw on the commonality of addressing social or environmental issues, and not yielding financial benefits.

Rooted in the rationale that independent actors have a limited impact when working in isolation (Stott, 2019) and that together, 'the sum is greater than the parts' (McQuaid, 2000), CSPs have been supported by the theory of sectorial differentiation (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010). Namely, by creating synergies, leveraging resources and benefitting from each other's competitive strengths (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010), partnerships can generate increased access to knowledge, financial resources and networks (Stott, 2019), improve organisational capacity and skills and strengthen reputation and legitimacy (Hebb and Thaker, 2014; Dentoni et al., 2018).

4.2.2 Challenges of CSPs

The literature below introduces various challenges experienced by CSPs as a collaborative form of action, with the aim of understanding their methodological implications on collaborative planning for systemic change.

According to Waddock (1989), the fragile construct of a partnership is subject to leadership and the circumstantial environment. Andrew and Entwistle (2010) contribute that the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of CSPs and their outcomes is affected by the background and the motives of the partners involved, identified by Selsky and Parker (2005) as the mix of self-interest and altruism. Here, the commercial interests of private actors, as well as the weakness of corrupt public institutions can affect the outcome of the partnership (Findlay-Brooks and Visser, 2007). Similarly, van Tudler and Keen (2018) raise the issue of partnership configuration, ambitions and the dominance or motives of the private sector.

Unequal resources and the existing power structures on which partnerships are built can spring power imbalances among partners as well as with the local community (Findlay-Brooks and Visser, 2007). Inherent roles and power can erode trust and the outcomes of the partnership (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Hebb and Thaker, 2009). As such, partnerships can incentivize political or opportunistic behaviour, reinforcing further power disparities (Selsky and Parker, 2005). The overview of challenges experienced by CSPs is presented in Table 4.

Author	**Challenges of CSPs**						
	Leadership	Institutional background	Motives & ambitions	Partnership configuration	Unequal resources	Inherent power & roles	Incentive creation
Waddock (1989)	✓						
Andrew and Entwistle (2010)		✓	✓				
Selsky and Parker (2005)			✓			✓	✓
Findlay-Brooks and Visser (2007)		✓			✓	✓	

Van Tudler and Keen (2018)			✓	✓			
Hebb and Thaker (2009)						✓	

Table 4. Challenges of CSPs

4.3 Implications for this research

4.3.1 Systemic change: conceptual reflections

The literature shows that the concept of systemic change is variably defined based on different dimensions of analysis. Of all views discussed, the research adopts systemic change as a process (Clarke and Crane, 2018; Lomax, 2019) aimed at addressing social-environmental issue in the system (Senge et al., 2006), with a view on the role of the actors involved (Clarke and Crane's, 2018).

4.3.2 Cross-sectoral partnerships for development: research definition

Informed by Becker and Smith (2018), Selsky and Parker's (2005) and Stadtler (2016) and rooted in the rationale of collaborative action, the research introduces the concept cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D). The concept and its definition are adapted to fit the context of development cooperation relevant to this research, in line with the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

> ***Cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D)*** *are bilateral or multilateral collaborations between not-for-profit, public and/or private organisations, who contribute financial resources, knowledge, expertise, and/or other resources necessary to achieve common socio-economic or environmental goals, as informed by the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.*

4.3.3 Methodological reflections

The literature informs that viewing the world as complex systems (Quarshie and Leuschner, 2018), bears consequences on the methodology of planning for systemic change. Similarly, power and equity (Green, 2016; Petty and Leach, 2020) are factors influencing issue. In this context, learning (Abercrombie et al., 2015; Green, 2016; Tudler and Keen, 2018; Quarshire and Leuschner, 2018), complexity-sensitive planning (Linnenluecke et al., 2017; Tudler and

Keen, 2018), systemic thinking (Green, 2016; Quarshire and Leuschner, 2018) and collaborative approaches (Green, 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2017; Tudler and Keen, 2018; Quarshire and Leuschner, 2018) receive positive endorsement.

Finally, the literature informs that as collaborative forms of action, CSPs present specific challenges, which can bear consequences on the planning methodology for systemic change. Leadership and partnership configuration (Waddock, 1989; Tudler and Keen, 2018), institutional background and motives (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Andrew and Entwistle, 2010; Tudler and Keen, 2018) power and incentive creation (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Findlay-Brooks and Visser, 2007; Hebb and Thaker, 2009) are notable challenges for CSPs.

The conceptual and methodological limitations identified in the transdisciplinary literature on CSPs planning for systemic change, raise fundamental concerns. These limitations require more knowledge creation, justifying the need for this research.

5. Theoretical Grounding and Key Concepts

This chapter introduces three sections, presenting theories and key concepts for the research. The first section introduces systems theories as philosophical ontologies, including aspects of Boudling's systems classification (Dekkers, 2017a), Luhmann's theory of functional social systems (Germain, 1978; Kihlström, 2012; Mattheis, 2012; Albert, 2019) and the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory (Innes and Booher, 1999; Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017; Lomax, 2019). These theories provide the fundamental understanding of the world of complex social systems, helping understand systemic change and the role and challenges of CSP4Ds.

Next, epistemologies of applied systems theory on programme/non-programmed decisions (Dekkers, 2017a) and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1985; Khisty, 1995) are introduced to define the methodological framework of systemic change. These theories inform the analytical framework and the themes on which the primary data is collected.

Each section concludes by introducing key concepts and implications for this research. The theoretical grounding concludes with the analytical framework of the research, a summary that informs on the connection and the employment of the various theories and frameworks introduced.

5.1 The ontology of Social Systems

General systems theory proposes a rich and multidisciplinary debate of ontological and epistemological considerations that shape the view of the world, of how systems come to being, their defining elements, characteristics and behaviour. Systems theory has been influenced by the contribution of Wiener's work in cybernetics in 1948, von Bertalanffy's general systems theory from 1968, Talcott Parson's theory of structural-functionalism from 1951, Niklas Luhmann's theory of functional social systems from 1970 and Carel B. Germain's social ecological theory from 1978 (Kihlström, 2012). To better understand the ontological implications of the world as systems, the next section narrows down general systems theory to the realm of social systems theory relevant to the discipline in which this research is grounded.

5.1.1 Social systems theory: Boulding & Luhmann

In a hierarchical depiction, Boulding (1985) divides systems into eleven categories, as shown in Figure 2, where each level possesses an increased degree of complexity compared to the preceding (Dekkers, 2017a). The increasingly complex domain of social systems is concerned with the interaction, communication and the creation of meaning between people and their systems (Dekkers, 2017a). These interactions hold *learning* central to their process, which becomes evaluated and communicated throughout social institutions or social systems, identified by Boulding as the economic, political, communicative and integrative systems (Dekkers, 2017a).

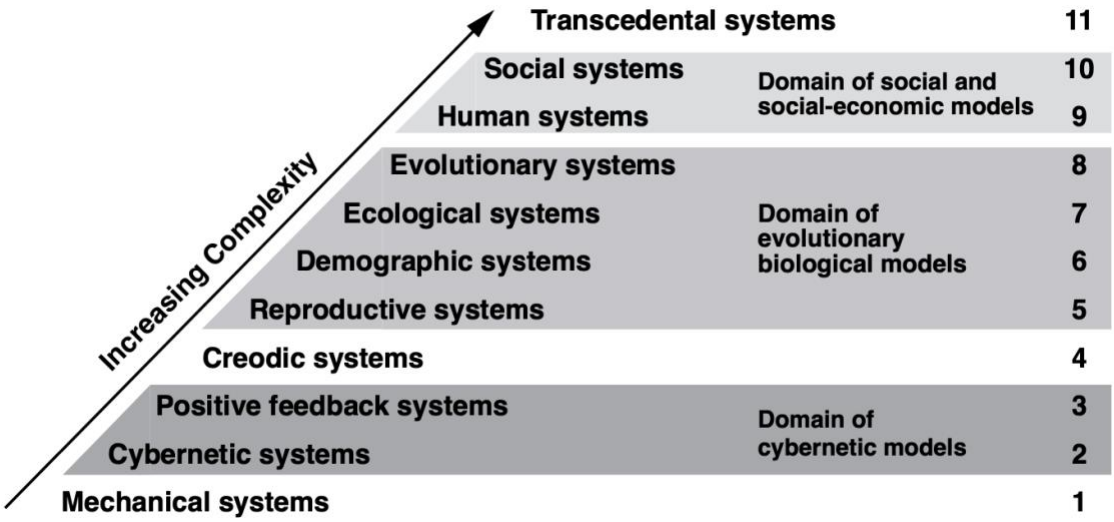


Figure 2. The eleven levels of Boulding system classification (1985) (Dekkers, 2017a)

Seeking to further understand the level of social systems, Niklas Luhmann claims that at the national level, the modern society is composed of functional, closed systems, such as the legal, political, religious, educational, scientific, economic, art systems etc (Kihlström, 2012; Albert, 2019). In Niklas Luhmann's radical constructivist paradigm (Albert, 2019), a social system emerges and exists only through functional differentiation (Schwanitz, 1995) – a process that generates social meaning (Albert, 2019) and divides the society into numerous autopoietic (sub)systems (Mattheis, 2012). Social evolution is linked to the process of functional differentiation, boundary constitution, system-specific communication and feedback loops (Albert, 2019). In this case, feedback is the system's mechanism of dynamic behaviour in response to the input from the environment, influencing the process of change, learning and adaptation (Germain, 1978). More importantly, Luhmann accepts power as pervasive in relations and social systems, expressed through interactions and communication (Borch, 2005).

In addition to functional systems, Luhmann, depicts social systems as organisational or interaction systems, where inter-systemic relationships are possible through systems coupling. Interaction systems are based on presence that can extend and contribute to the function of a system, drawing on its system-specific communication (Albert, 2019). Meetings, gatherings, conversations or school classes can be considered as interaction systems, testifying that interaction systems can be formed within another social system (Albert, 2019). Interaction and functional systems are considered most relevant for this research and will be introduced in the discussion of CSP4Ds connected to systemic change.

5.1.2 Theory of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS)

Despite their essential ontological contribution in defining and assigning meaning to the world, constructivist theories are considered not to sufficiently address the issue of complexity, fundamental to the empirical context of this research. Consequently, the CAS is introduced to provide a deeper understanding of the connections and dependencies that characterise complex social systems.

Inspired by physical sciences, the CAS is concerned with the study of systems defined by diverse and simultaneously interacting agents (sub-systems), which manifest a non-linear, dynamic, and collective pattern of behaviour (Innes and Booher, 1999; Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017; Lomax, 2019). CASs are characterised by distributed control and connectivity among its constituting agents (Dekkers, 2017a). As self-organising systems, CAS create emergent patterns independently from its environments, where positive feedback reinforces the CAS's self-organising function (Eidelson, 1997). CAS also detaches itself from the mechanistic view of the world, where the behaviour of a system can be controlled, and where certain measures should lead to predictable reactions in the system (Innes and Booher, 1999). With that said, CAS proposes a view over the world as an organism, where social systems can adapt and change as constituent agents learn from the changes happening in the environment (Innes and Booher, 1999). According to Inner and Booher (1999), in CAS, system performance and innovation is supported by increased communication flows among networked agents.

5.1.3 Social Systems: implications for this research & research definition

Understanding social systems is critical to understanding systemic change. As a result, this section introduced theories that provide fundamental ontological considerations for defining the concept of social systems, rooting the process of systemic change, as shown in Figure 3. System theories also provide theoretical grounding for understanding CSP4Ds as interaction systems, with implications on their role vis-à-vis systemic change. Finally, the theories constitute the paradigm of the research – a systems view of the world.

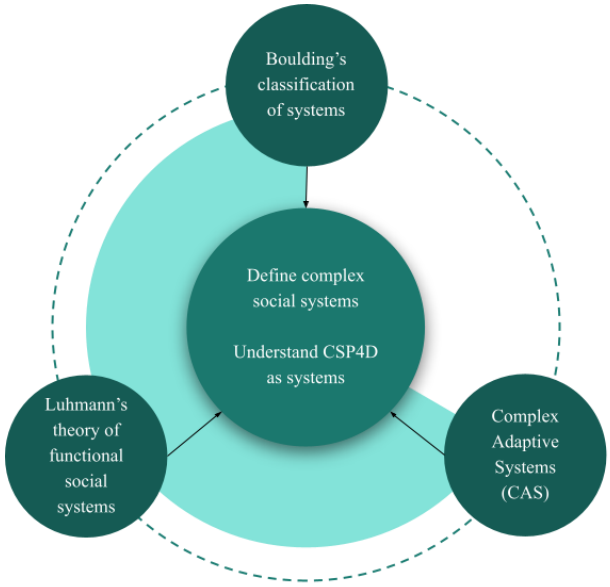


Figure 3. Representation of systems ontologies in the theoretical grounding

Understanding social systems, Boulding's classification provides a view of various systems levels, introducing increasingly complex social systems that hold learning central to their processes. Luhmann's theory contributes by understanding social systems based on their function in the society, informing about the system-specific communications, feedback loops and the dynamic behaviour of the systems in response to its surrounding environment. Finally, the CAS generate understanding of interconnections and interdependencies that link complex social systems and characterise their non-linear behaviour, where communication flows between agents increase increased performance and innovation. Based on these theories, the research proposes the following research definition of social systems as key concept:

> *(Complex) social systems are ensembles of structures, processes, and agents (sub-systems) that serve a system-specific function/purpose and hold system-specific communication, responding dynamically to changes in the external environment, through learning and adaptation; they can be found in complex, interconnected and interdependent networks.*

5.2 The epistemology of systemic change

The section discusses two theoretical and methodological views introducing the epistemology of systemic change as a process. This informs the analytical framework of the planning methodology for systemic change, used as lenses for data collection and analysis of CSP4D as collaborative planning.

5.2.1 Applied systems theory: programmed/non-programmed decisions

Applied systems theory connects planning with the degree of complexity associated with the problem addressed by the intervention (Dekkers, 2017a). The theory makes the distinction between programmed and non-programmed decisions, where the choice is underpinned by the approach to systems, change and problem definition.

Programmed decisions are linked to clearly defined problems, where the solutions and the expected results are well-known (Dekkers, 2017a). This approach falls in line with the Hard Systems Methodology (HSM), a goal-seeking view, which sees the world as engineerable, prone to control and optimization (Checkland, 1985; Khisty, 1995). This methodology has been criticized for its weakness in understanding the complexity of social systems (Khisty, 1995).

Non-programmed decisions are linked to ill-structured, complex or wicked problems which require novel solutions, numerous actors and an in-depth problem analysis to understand the root causes of the problems addressed (Khisty, 1995; Dekkers, 2017a). Planning and problem solving in the context of complex social systems requires creativity and intuition or heuristic approaches, such as systems thinking (Dekkers, 2017a). Defined as a set of synergistic skills that help identifying and understanding systems in order to devise adjustments accordingly (Arnold and Wade, 2015), systems thinking is particularly important in devising the methodological dimensions required in planning for systemic change.

5.2.2 Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

Arguably more suitable in the context of complex social systems and ill-defined problems, the SSM understands system models as epistemological, intellectual constructs (Checkland, 1985). The SSM rejects the mechanistic view of the world as ‘engineerable’ and alternatively, it seeks learning and participation, accepting inquiry as a never-ending process and it informs about four processes: perception, prediction, comparison and determination of change and action

(Khisty, 1995). Figure 3 provides a depiction of the SSM epistemology, drawn by Peter Checkland, the author of SSM (Winter, 2000).

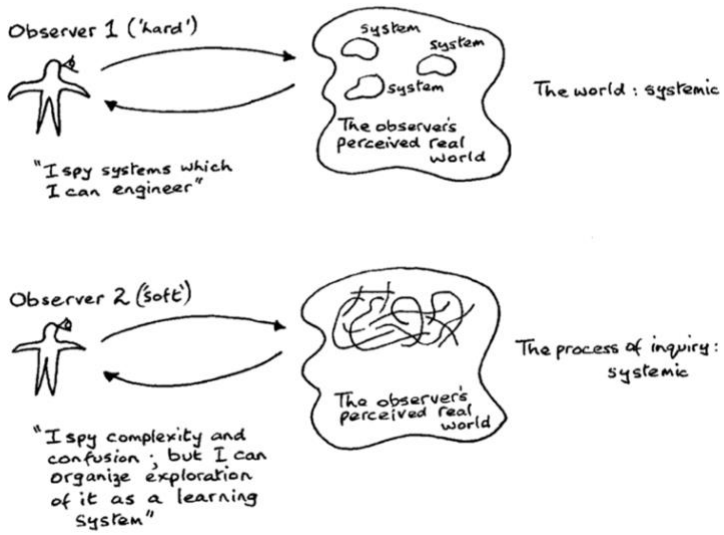


Figure 4. Hard vs soft systems perspective (Winter, 2000)

Problem situation

The first of the four processes – perception or problem analysis – aims at identifying, defining and understanding the rich picture surrounding the problem (Mehregan et al., 2012). It proposes a stakeholder analysis, cultural and political analysis, and an understanding of the power dynamics affecting the system (Khisty, 1995).

R.D. and Conceptualisation

The second process – prediction – aims at assembling the root definitions (R.D.) and the conceptual models of the relevant human activity systems (Tajino et al., 2005). This process of SSM engages systems thinking, as the systems are understood based on their specific communication and control mechanisms (Khisty, 1995).

Comparison

The third major process – comparison – analyses the conceptual models elaborated at the previous stage against the external reality (Khisty, 1995). According to Checkland (1985), the purpose of the comparison is to stir debates (next stage) on the suitability between conceptual models and the real world, strengthening the relevance of the intervention.

Required changes and action

The fourth and last process – changes and action – is concerned with the results of the debate on the comparison undertaken in the previous process. These changes aim at reassessing the intervention, so that it is feasible (i.e. logistics, mechanisms are effective) and culturally adequate (i.e. not only led by logic) (Khisty, 1995).

The SSM has a strong cyclical approach, seeking to accommodate the conflict between different interests (Checkland, 1985). While often employed as methodology of action research (Checkland, 1985), the SSM is criticised for a degree of subjectivism, concerned with subjects' interpretation of the reality, through its learning system, and not with the actual reality (Mingers, 1984). For this research, the four processes of SSM have been adapted to inform the analytical framework of the methodology of planning for systemic change.

5.2.3 Systemic change: implications for this research & research definition

Applied systems theory on programmed/non-programmed decisions and the SSM help understand systemic change as a dynamic process. They inform on the implications of varying approaches to social systems and problem complexity on the methodology of planning. The following research definition of systemic change has been elaborated, informed by systems epistemologies and learnings from the literature review:

> *Systemic change is the process aimed at tackling social or environmental issues existent in the function or the structure of the system, which requires a systemic planning methodology to devise action based on the system's behaviour and the complexity of the problem addressed.*

5.3 Analytical framework on planning methodology for systemic change

This section synthetises learnings from the theories introduced, into an analytical framework for the planning methodology. Elaborated based on systems ontologies and epistemologies, the purpose of the analytical framework is to inform the themes that guide data collection and the analysis of how CSP4Ds, as a collaborative form of action, experience the process of intervention planning for systemic change. The framework proposes three main dimensions, each with several underlying concepts, relevant in the process of planning for systemic change, as depicted in Figure 4 and described below:

5.3.1 Systemic contextual understanding

This dimension borrows from applied systems theory, systems thinking, and the 1st process of SSM, in analysing how CSPs experience the process of gaining a systemic contextual understanding of systems and the problem situation relevant to the intervention. The dimension encompasses the following concepts: understanding local systems, the connections between them, the cultural context, relevant stakeholders and their interests and the root causes that affect the problem situation. Informed by Luhmann's view on the pervasiveness of power in social systems, and the importance place by the SSM on power analysis, the dimension introduces power as a factor affecting the system and the CSP4D.

5.3.2 Designed intervention

Applied systems theory and the SSM informed that the intervention methodology and the choice between planning and implementation models is affected by the degree of complexity associated with the system and the problem situation. Compressing the 2nd through to the 4th process of the SSM, this dimension looks at how working in CSP4D affects the planning methodology and the model of the designed intervention, reflecting on planning and management practices considered suitable for systemic change in the context of CSP4D.

5.3.3 Learning and adaptation

The SSM informs that the cyclical learning process of intervention planning is made possible through debates and adjustments, thereby impacting the alignment between conceptual models envisaged for the intervention and the external reality. Borrowing from the 3rd and 4th process of the SSM, the dimension looks at how CSP4Ds experience learning and adaptation concerning the scope of the designed intervention, adjusting the designed intervention to the

needs of the changing external context. Moreover, as informed by Luhmann's theory and the CAS, feedback and learning support the system's capacity to respond and adapt to changes and stimuli coming from the external environment. Thereby, this dimension also looks at how CSP4D manage to tap into this process, by disseminating and communicating learnings externally, across the systems of the intervention.

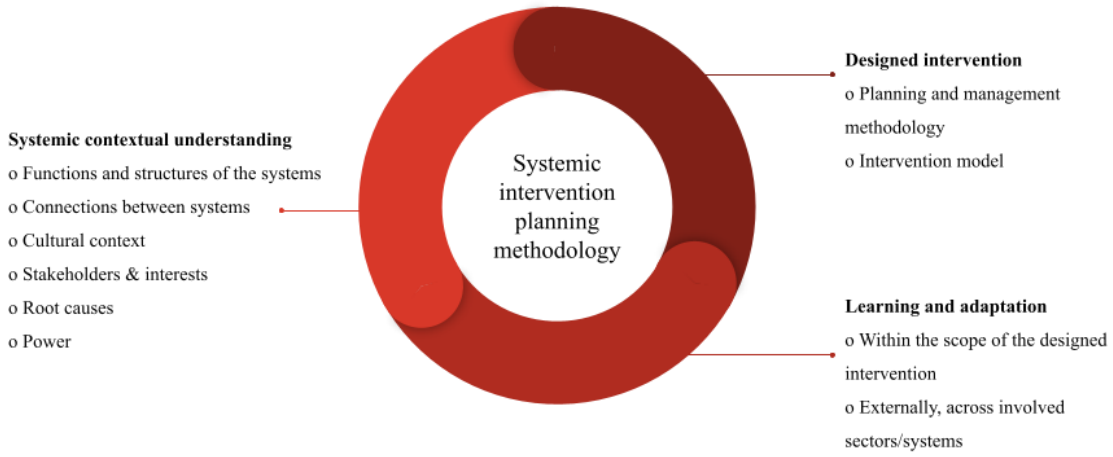


Figure 5. Depiction of the analytical framework

6. Methodology

The ontology and epistemology of the research have been influenced by its theoretical grounding, where theories of social systems, CAS, applied systems theory and the SSM shape the perception of the world, as well as the understanding of what and how can be studied (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Systems theories have allowed a holistic understanding of the connections and dependencies that create a dynamic environment for study, with critical considerations for power and its implications for change (Patton, 2015).

Moreover, the research borrows from the social constructivist paradigm. Acknowledging the world of complexity and diversity (Moses and Knutsen, 2012), social constructivism provides fundamental assumptions, in line with the research problem, where complexity is recognised as a characteristic of modern social systems and of the intricate problems that derive from them. Social constructivism allows for different meanings to be assigned to the subject matter, based on the participants' experiences. These experiences are interpreted following the themes informed by the theoretical grounding and the analytical framework (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The research borrows from phenomenology, seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena CSP4D and systemic change, based on the participants' experience (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The research design follows the flow process of qualitative inquiry in determining the assumptions of the problem situation and the analytical theories that have informed the course of the research, and which have been simultaneously shaped by its emergent, inductive process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Allowing for theories about the problem situation to be developed based on the participants' experiences, the researcher becomes instrumental in the process of analysis and creation of meaning (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Carried under the special circumstances of COVID-19, the research data collection has been affected in the sense that the natural setting has been replaced by the digital and online setting.

The research question and its sub-research questions are answered by means of reviewing existing research, selecting suitable theories, assembling, and applying an analytical framework to the qualitative data collected for the purpose of this research. The study relies on desk research, as well as on primary data collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews, as shown in Table 5.

Main RQ: How can CSP4D better design development interventions that support systemic change in the context of international development cooperation?		
Sub-RQ #	**Pathway to answering the Sub-RQ:**	
	Theory	**Data collection method & analysis**
Sub-RQ 1. How does conceptual understanding of systemic change affect the methodology of planning for systemic change?	Systems ontologies: Luhmann's theory of social systems, CAS Systems epistemologies: applied systems theory for programmed/non-programmed decisions & the SSM	Desk research Primary empirical data content analysis Theoretical reasoning based on systems ontologies & epistemologies
Sub-RQ 2. What challenges do CSP4Ds experience as a collaborative form of planning when designing interventions for systemic change; and why?	Systems ontologies: Luhmann's theory of social systems, CAS Systems epistemologies: applied systems theory for programmed/non-programmed decisions & the SSM)	Desk research Primary empirical data content analysis
Sub-RQ 3. Why do CSP4D experience these challenges in planning for systemic change?	Systems ontologies: Luhmann's theory of social systems, CAS Systems epistemologies: applied systems theory for programmed/non-programmed decisions & the SSM)	Theoretical reasoning based on systems ontologies & epistemologies, desk research, empirical data
Sub-RQ 4. How can a systemic planning methodology be improved to fit the collaborative	Systems epistemologies: applied systems theory for programmed/non-	Theoretical reasoning based on systems ontologies & epistemologies, desk research, empirical data

planning context of CSP4Ds?	programmed decisions & the SSM)	

Table 5. Pathways to answering the RQ: theory, data source and method of analysis

6.1 Desk research

By reviewing existing research on current conceptual and methodological debates, the desk research or the review of secondary data helps anchoring this research in a thorough understanding of current academic advancement on the issues addressed (Bryman, 2012). As such, desk research introduces conceptual and methodological considerations on systemic change, CSPs, their challenges and planning for systemic change. Where literature was available, the desk research helps answering all sub-RQs.

6.2 Theoretical reasoning using systems ontologies and epistemologies

The research introduces systems ontologies and epistemologies, which provide the theoretical grounding and the analytical framework assembled to address the conceptual and methodological gap introduced in this research. Systems ontologies and epistemologies carry an increased weight in reasoning and answering sub-RQ 1, 2 and 4, providing lenses to understand the connections between conceptual understanding of social systems, systemic change and the implications on the planning methodology. Finally, the theoretical grounding places CSP4Ds in the context of systems ontologies, thereby helping understand the contribution and the challenges of collaborative planning based on a systemic methodology.

6.3 Semi-structured interviews & content analysis

Provided the need for rich and in-depth data required by the transdisciplinary nature of the study, semi-structured interviews have been chosen as a suitable qualitative data collection method, allowing for an exploration of the phenomena based on the respondents' experiences (Seidman, 2006). Provided the sole responsibility of the researcher in collecting and analysing the data, qualitative interviews classify as primary data, collected for the purpose of this research (Bryman, 2012). The semi-structured interviews and the content analysis discussed below have supported answering sub-RQ 2 and 4, with some contribution to sub-RQ1.

6.3.1 Purposeful sampling

According to Bryman (2012), purposeful sampling can be applied both to the respondents, as well as to the context. In the case of participants, purposeful sampling has allowed for a strategic choice of interviewees, whose experience would yield the in-depth data required by the research (Bryman, 2012; Patton, 2015). The interviewees have been selected through criteria sampling (Bryman, 2012): belonginess to the non-profit sector and relevant professional experience connected to CSP4Ds and/or systemic change. When it comes to contextual purposeful sampling (Bryman, 2012), the research drew a wider area of interest: international development sector. The choices have been made to fit the purpose of the research, the access, and resources available for data collection.

Eleven respondents have been selected through personal network, seen as 'informal gatekeepers' (Seidman, 2006), as well as by reaching out to unknown individuals, who have been identified at webinars and through Internet searches following the sought profile. All interviewees have been emailed with an invitation stating the scope of the research. Seventeen potential respondents have been contacted via email, of which eleven have agreed to participate in the research – see Appendix 3, for the list of participants. The interviewees have been anonymised, while keeping relevant aspects such as sector, thematic focus, expertise/role and country-base. The interviewees have been contacted for approval of this representation. Ten out of eleven respondents have identified themselves belonging to the non-profit sector, while one to the social impact sector.

6.3.2 Informed consent form and interview guide

Upon agreement to participate, all interviewees have been emailed with the informed consent form, which includes details on the scope of the research, informing on the what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom, including an overview of rights, vulnerabilities, dissemination of data and contact details (Seidman, 2006). For ease of understanding but without imposing prior preparation, all interviewees have been sent the interview guide beforehand. The interview guide has been modified as the data collection progressed, to reflect new theoretical perspectives and to include more refined questions. See Appendices 1 and 2 for the two documents.

6.3.3 Data collection & Software

The interviews have been recorded through inbuilt computer software Voice Memos and have been transcribed using Otter.ai. Both operations have been consented by the interviewees (Silverman, 2013). The large corpus of data resulted was cleaned, processed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (Bryman, 2012).

6.3.4 Content analysis

The data collected has been subject to thematic content analysis, following an inductive reasoning process (Bryman, 2012). The data has undergone a coding process in NVivo, following the three main themes and their underlaying sub-themes informed by the analytical framework, shown in Table 6. For the first and third, the codes have been categorized under challenges and opportunities, factors supporting and factors hampering the given process/concept. Analysis on the second theme has yielded categories of suitable/unsuitable approaches. In addition to the theoretically informed themes, the research accepted the emergence of new themes, based on their significance in the experiences described by the interviewees. As the research aims at exploring in-depth experiences and not at generalizing findings, quantification of codes has been considered unsuitable and therefore been omitted from the analysis. The quotes included in the results section have been consulted for final consent by the participants.

6.3.5 NVivo analytical themes

Analytical themes for systemic intervention planning methodology	
Principal themes	**Sub-themes**
Systemic contextual understanding	o Functions and structures of the systems o Connections between systems o Cultural context o Stakeholders & interests o Root causes of the problem situation o Power affecting the system & problem situation

The designed intervention	o Methodology of planning and management o Model of the intervention
Learning and adaptation	o Within the scope of the designed intervention o Externally, across involved sectors/systems

Table 6. NVivo analytical themes

6.4 Ethical considerations

As qualitative inquiry is closely connected to personal experiences, insights and opinions, the role of the researcher becomes increasingly important in assigning meaning to the experiences described. As such, some ethical considerations must be made.

6.4.1 Positionality & self-reflection

Acknowledging the debate surrounding qualitative research in terms of scientific objectivity/subjectivity (Silverman, 2013), the research was conducted with a high degree of self-reflection and awareness for one's role as a researcher. As stated by Patton (2015), trustworthiness and authenticity are affecting the integrity of qualitative research and as consequence, one must meticulously and systematically assess their research. Particularly relevant in the case of development studies (Withers-Stewart et al., 2014), self-reflectivity allows for introspection on one's positionality, concerning what information is collected, by whom, from whom and with what purpose, affecting the painted portrait of the world. The researcher aimed at increasing trustworthiness by applying self-reflection and documenting the research process transparently.

6.4.2 Power asymmetry

The power asymmetry between the researcher and the expert interviewees has been identified based on the age and experience of the latter. Self-reflection helped acknowledging this expression of power and hierarchy, their possible psychological effects and impacts on the research (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Having identified these inherited power imbalances, the researcher feels confident that their effects were benign on the researcher and the results of the study.

6.5 Limitations

6.5.1 Limitations to qualitative inquiry

Carried under the mark of qualitative inquiry, the research is subject to the strengths and weaknesses of its type. Contrary to quantitative research, qualitative presents limitations in terms of its measure of validity and reliability (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative inquiry is more difficult to be externally replicated or for the findings to be generalized (Bryman, 2012). On the other hand, qualitative research carries the strength of allowing for the elaboration of theories, which based on the gaps addressed by this research, is considered to be more important (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011). Bryman (2012) introduces trustworthiness as an alternative method of evaluating the data. In this context, while the research lacks triangulation of methods, the theoretical rigor, thick description and peer review included in this research aimed at strengthening its trustworthiness (Bryman, 2012).

Moreover, relying on experience of the participants, this phenomenological-inspired study can be criticised for being strongly influenced by the subjective experiences of those (Bryman, 2012). Liked to this, the researcher bias is a limitation that must be acknowledged as to potentially affect all stages of qualitative research, including interviewee selection, data analysis and discussion (Seidman, 2006). In this context, the research can be criticised for being impressionistic or subjective (Bryman, 2012).

6.5.2 Practical contingencies and sampling

Purposeful sampling together with practical contingencies, such as resources, time and access to data, have affected the selection of respondents included in this research (Silverman, 2013). As such, it can be argued that the data presented draws on a group of respondents that is both homogenous and heterogenous, depending on the assessment screens.

Analysed through the screens of age, race, social status, education (Patton, 2015), and geographical base, the group of respondents can be criticized for presenting similar characteristics. The data included in this research predominantly reflects the experience of individuals based in high-income countries, engaged in international organizations, which can be reflected in their opportunities for personal and professional fulfilment. It must be acknowledged that these aspects can influence the respondents' experiences and the richness of data collected. Analysed through the screens of thematic focus, the pool of interviewees is

highly heterogenous i.e. children rights and conflict, peace and disarmament, WASH, social impact and entrepreneurship, gender and climate justice, climate resilience, humanitarian aid, various sustainability and ODA. This heterogeneity is acknowledged to possibly affect the respondents' experiences and the data collected for this analysis. While the research cannot claim theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012), the selected pool of respondents provided high quality in-depth data, allowing for a rich qualitative analysis, complementing the desk research and theoretical reasoning carried for the research.

Finally, can been acknowledged that alternative research designs, quantitative or mixed methods approach could have informed more generalisable knowledge (Bryman, 2012). However, provided the scope, resources available and complexity of the concepts addressed in this research and its intended contribution, qualitative inquiry can be defended for yielding the suitable in-depth data required by this phenomenological-inspired, inductive study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Gaps in the current inquiry represent opportunities for further research.

7. Results

The thematic content analysis carried in NVivo on the data resulted from the eleven interviews has informed the results presented below. Three analytical dimensions informed by systems epistemologies structure the presentation of findings on the collaborative planning experience of CSP4Ds, including challenges and reflections on (un)suitable practices.

7.1 Systemic contextual understanding

Overall, the interviewees have expressed varying opinions regarding the contribution of CSP4Ds in gaining the systemic contextual understanding deemed necessary in planning for systemic change. The opinions ranged from very positive to neutral or reserved, depending on different factors that are later discussed. On one hand, some interviewees highlighted the benefit of CSP4Ds in gaining a better understanding of systems, their functions, interconnections, and perpetual changes. This is assigned to cross-sectoral synergies creation, engagement of different stakeholders and perspectives and for having a continuous and direct access 'inside' the systems, allowing for information on changes to flow.

> *"Partnerships, which are deliberately designed to have systemic changes their goal, if they are designed well, naturally, the way that they work is through engagement of all the stakeholders collectively trying to come up with an understanding of the system through bringing together multiple different perspectives. And through constant adaptation and iteration of the understanding of the system based on more knowledge is gained from new stakeholders"* (Interviewee 11)

> *"They definitely help to understand the connections. […] on that kind of basic level, it helps to understand how to better work together. You might have the Education Office, the health office, water office, maybe some other NGOs or CSOs. Private sector actors coming together to arrive at where they think the WASH system is. And they help to bring their insights and their perspectives from where they see it."* (Interviewee 4)

> *"I think it's incredibly useful. If you talk about systems as a process, then you're constantly having to gain more understanding of the system. It's not the kind of a one-time point at the very start. And so, when you're working in cross sectoral partnerships, for me, there is often at the very start, depending on what problem you're solving, getting input from many different people to attack that elephant from different directions is really useful."* (Interviewee 7)

On the other hand, some interviewees raised concerns regarding the overall limitations of institutional CSP4Ds during intervention design. Differences assigned to institutional and sectorial structures, the sheer complexity and variance of partnerships configuration and the complex governing structures required to manage the CSP4D were highlighted as potential barriers in the context of collaborative planning. The interviewees informed that synergies are not an automatic collaborative advantage benefiting the CSP4D and their collaborative work.

> *"The idea is that the whole has to be more than the sum of the parts. But often, a partnership can become so difficult and so complicated, and especially if it's cross-sectoral, people don't speak the same language… if it's done the right way, then you can benefit from each other's synergies, you can explore synergies, and you can help achieve many more things you have to work together. It's very context dependent, case by case."* (Interviewee 8)

> *"One thing I'd like to say is that there's no magic bullet that if you bring people together, you're gonna solve the problem of working in silos. No. Because how do these partnerships look like? We come in partnership with different interests, right, we may have a common objective. one. But the institution is bigger than that objective."* (Interviewee 9)

7.1.1 Challenges to systemic contextual understanding

Further into understanding the factors challenging the CSP4Ds from gaining the systemic perception, the interviews introduced several problems, shown in Figure 5. Overall, the institutional backdrop, reflected in different motivations and perceptions is one of the main collaborative barriers of CSP4Ds. Here, too much diversity has been found to increase the difficulty of CSP4D to engage in synergies and tap into the collaborative advantage mentioned before.

The interviewees also referred to silo thinking as one of the most problematic aspects that creates difficulties for collaboration, negatively affect the outcome of the collaborative planning process. Moreover, disconnection from local communities is highlighted to affect the process, accentuated by international operations of CSP4Ds. As CSP4D operate in given systems, the fragmentation of a system raises challenges for CSP4D from gaining contextual understanding and to implement change.

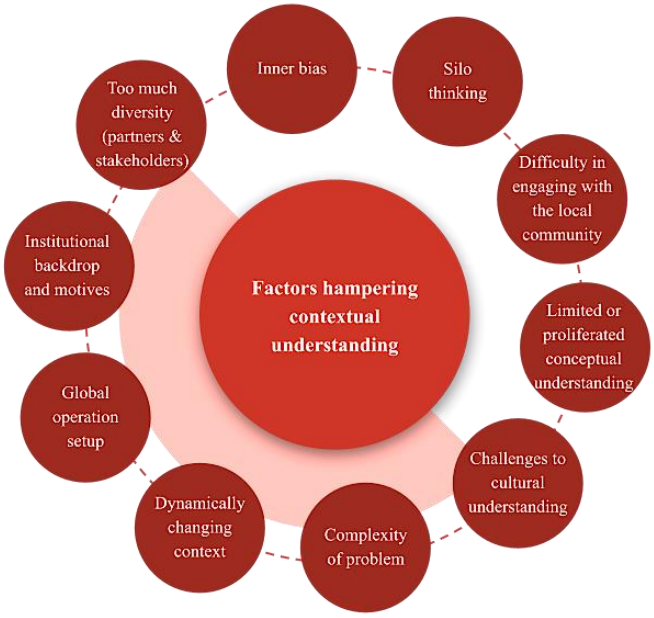


Figure 6. Factors that hamper systemic contextual understanding

> *"Then we come back to this inner game, this bias, that we have to continue to challenge ourselves, from the belief that we have the solution."* (Interviewee 1)

> *"But then to change the systems and how they function, then you are going to work with different structures that are mostly not even speaking together… The interrelationship between different systems, whether it's political, or economic, or health or education, is unquestionable, definitely… But it has one bigger system that is disjointed, even within the system. So that is the challenge we usually have. And working in silos. Each group is more concerned about what their primary role is, what their primary function is."* (Interviewee 9)

Conceptual limitations are seen to hamper this process as well. The interviewees expressed concerns regarding the definition and the suitability of concepts such as root causes. Reflections were made on how the complexity of the problem clashes with the idea of understanding *root* causes and that this creates challenges to how interventions are designed to address them.

> *"If one accepts that (i.e. the Cynefin definition of complex issues), then understanding the root causes is an issue. Because by implication, no one would know the root causes, before you embarked on something. Different groups might have an opinion as to what is causing something and how best to tackle it. But there is not a consensus about the root causes."* (Interviewee 10)

> *"I think sometimes we tend to use the expression root causes a little bit too simplistic."* (Interviewee 2)

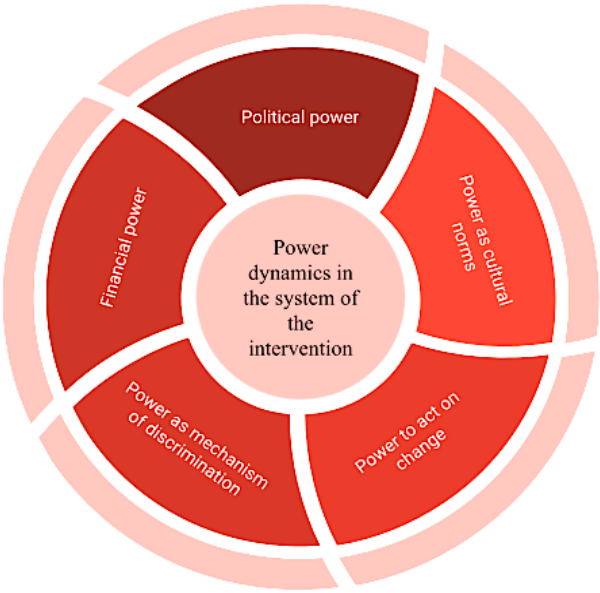
For cultural understanding, in addition to the challenges relevant for this dimension overall, the interviewees introduced a new realm of barriers, ranging from individual assumptions to the sheer complexity of culture, including religious views. These considerations connect with the already mentioned silo thinking and inner bias, and the international operations often carried in the context development cooperation.

Regarding stakeholder and their interests, the interviews informed that CSP4Ds could help identifying and understanding them, increasingly important when the success of the partnership is seen to depend on identifying these interests and motives. However, there is a risk that CSP4Ds can generate conflicts rooted in power imbalances and mismatching interests. In this case, the interviewees stress the importance of leadership in raising awareness, understanding, and mitigating the negative effects of such motivations. Particularly for development actors, it was increasingly important to recognize one's position, role, and responsibility regarding power dynamics.

> *"For (organisation name), that's obviously the conflict between commercial interest versus income and income for systemic change. […] I think that is an inbuilt conflict of interest that it's very important to have very clear guidelines and policies on. And from the beginning, be very clear with every interested stakeholder"* (Interviewee 5)

> *"Development actors come in and provide resources in different forms, be it monetary resources or other and they do capacity building. But they don't look too much at the motivations of the different actors, which stem from these different systems and can be different. I think it's crucial to look at these*

motivations, analyse the situation… This is what we call conflict sensitive programme management. You look at not only power, but also at where are the different conflicts and what you do coming in as an INGO, how you influence these different things." (Interviewee 6)



As power analysis represents an integral part in gaining a systemic understanding of the context and the problem situation, the interviewees appointed at different types of power that affect the system of the intervention, shown in Figure 6. Moreover, the interviews informed that by identifying power dynamics and by engaging in good management, CSP4Ds have the potential to raise awareness and to challenge these power imbalances.

Figure 7. Power in the system of the intervention

"It might be very beneficial to have a workshop, for example, where you do political economy and power analysis. And you speak about these different powers related to the concrete problem you try to address. And if possible, you do it with all the different stakeholders involved. They will give you their perspective, and because they have different interests and different perspectives, it will complement the picture and make you aware of where they see power happening... I think it's really crucial to analyse these power structures." (Interviewee 6)

"So multi stakeholder initiatives or cross sectoral-partnerships have the potential to do this. And by bringing in the communities and those affected to be part of the solution. Then yes, you're going to have far more appropriate solutions to the challenges. Not only that, you're going to be engaging far more resources, so that people rather than being beneficiaries are empowered to bring their own resources to the table… And so, if it's done well, these CSPs

can be part of a fundamental shift in how we do and how we think about development." (Interviewee 11)

"CSPs help understand one another, it helps working together, but if the purpose is only to make profit, then it will create conflicts rather than mitigate them… It has to be well-managed" (Interviewee 1)

In addition to the factors mentioned in the analytical framework, the discussion on power and stakeholder conflicts has revealed several factors that stir power imbalances within the CSP4D. These internal power dynamics raise concerns for collaborative planning in the context of development cooperation, with implications on how interventions are designed, the effectiveness and equity of the process. Factors ranging from aid architecture, financial (donor) power and the conditionalities of funds, to decision making processes, institutional capacity, possession and enactment on knowledge, mindsets and patronizing behaviour can all negatively affect the collaborative planning process of CSP4Ds. Extracts from the interviews can be found in Appendix 4.

As numerous of these power imbalances can be traced to structural issues, the interviews reflected on actions that development actors can undertake to identify, be aware of and help mitigate the effects of negative power imbalances. The interviewees stressed the need for equity and equality in the planning process, strengthening local ownership, transparency, and shared accountability. The interviewees also reflected on the need of acknowledging all partner's capabilities, to facilitate 'co-dependency' through mutual learning and circular economic models. Likewise, financial redistribution and managing financial and non-financial incentives are considered important, alongside with creating opportunities to leverage partners' messages, by connecting to relevant networks, donors, and audiences. Finally, formal instruments were considered to bare some weight in this process, however not essential. Trust, respect, and ethical values were considered to carry more weight in establishing an equitable collaborative environment.

7.1.2 Factors supporting contextual understanding

Figure 8. Factors supporting systemic contextual understanding

Responding to the challenges experienced by CSP4Ds regarding this methodological dimension, the interviews discussed some factors that supports CSP4D in this process, shown in Figure 7. The interviewees drew on the need to engage with local and diverse stakeholders, from partners to beneficiaries and to create channels supporting dialogue and participation. These points represent opportunities for CSP4D to capitalise on practices identified as enhancing their capacity to gain contextual understanding.

7.2 The designed intervention

7.2.1 Unsuitable practices

Discussing the designed intervention, the interviewees appointed at a few practices that are raising concerns, challenging CSP4D and the process of systemic change, shown in Figure 8. Here some issues discussed before, such as the architecture of development, funding channels, a lack of or an inequitable local consultation and engagement in the planning processes, were associated with proposed theoretical intervention models that are unfit for the local needs and contexts. These issues were accused to reinforce power dynamics, fuel wrong incentives, or generate other unintended negative consequences driven by culturally inappropriate interventions.

Figure 9. Problematic and unsuitable practices in the designed intervention

"We'll have a day for developing a proposal. Can we even share it with our partners to read through and tell us if it's okay or if it doesn't work? Then going on saying, we have money here, can we partner together and do this? And that's how development is driven… But sometimes it's not even relevant for them at all." (Interviewee 9)

"Now, in terms of appropriateness, there's sometimes a bit of a gap between theoretical models, we as an NGO come in with. So, it's important to have in your team people who are either from these countries or people who have a lot of experience in intercultural working and in designing and implementing projects… Sometimes it's the case that you bring in a model, which is actually inappropriate. But you still do it. Partners still work with it, and it creates the wrong incentives." (Interviewee 6)

Moreover, according to the interviewees, interventions are too often designed based on a linear thinking model, funded for short cycles, seeking short-term gratification, or simply not challenging the status quo enough. The interviewees appoint at several reasons for which the alternatives required by systemic change is facing barriers. Reasons are ranging from a lengthy commitment required by systemic interventions and complex issues to the personal and institutional mindsets, capacities and resources required. Risk aversion, organisational strategies are other reasons.

"Even without levels of challenge, then when you put in the way that donors fund projects, and the fact that everybody wants action and nobody wants to do the hard work, or nobody wants to fund the hard work of the engagement and the relationship building, and the collective intelligence, development, etc. that is required if these programmes are going to be successful… If we're talking about something like this, it can take a couple of years just to get that level of engagement and trust and knowledge." (Interviewee 11)

"Of course, needs sound tempting. We see the needs and we design the response based on that. But you might end up with the wrong response, too short sighted. That's not good enough." (Interviewee 2)

7.2.2 Suitable practices

Alternatively, the discussions pointed at several approaches for intervention planning and project management, as well as for models, which are defended by the interviewees as most suitable for the context of systemic change cross-cutting thematic focus, shown in Figure 9.

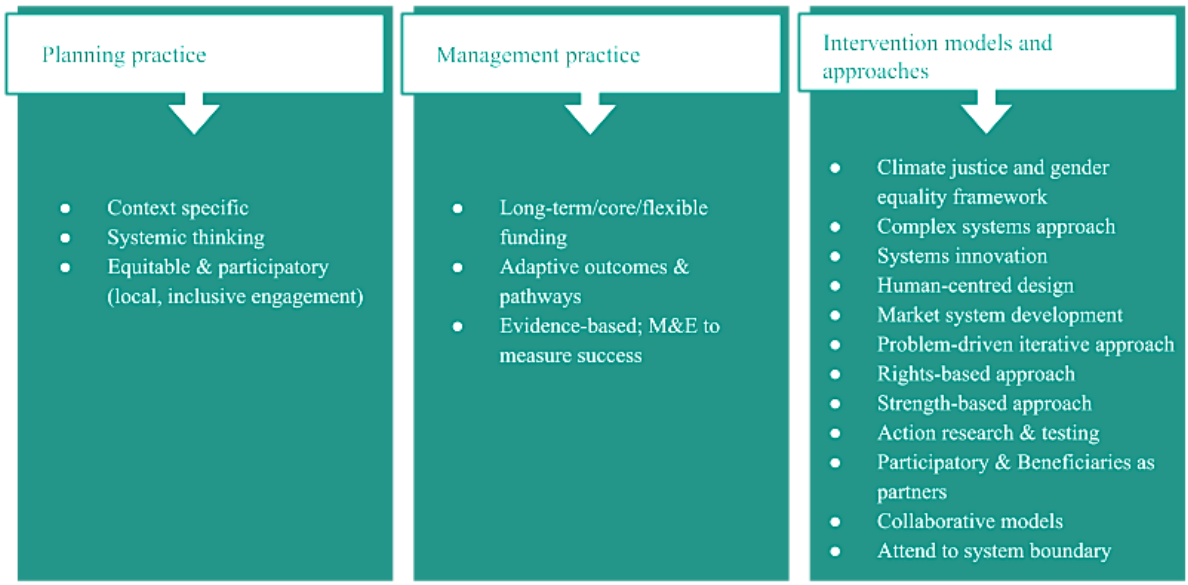


Figure 10. Suitable practices in the designed intervention

Strongly supported in all interviews, local engagement, context-specific planning and systemic thinking are considered critical in the planning process.

> *"But what the opportunity is, with system thinking and systems strengthening, is having those partnerships that are grounded in a really detailed context analysis of what the problem actually is."* (Interviewee 4)

Moreover, in addition to seeing CSPs as a cost and resource-effective implementation strategy for the intervention, the interviewees raised the need for long-term, strategic investment, as well as trust and flexibility from donors.

> *"When it comes to the interventions that are funded by the company, then the method of planning, the intervention is participatory. And that's very important for us"* (Interviewee 5)

Furthermore, while valuable, flexibility and adaptive management should be associated with rigorous monitoring, to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the intervention. The latter

issue has previously raised concerns in the context of assessing the success of both CSPs and systemic interventions.

> *"One thing that was key was having quite broad outcome areas, which didn't really tie us down to a specific set of outputs, or activities. That allowed for flexibility to design based on the context analysis at the start."* (Interviewee 4)

Lastly, the interviewees appointed at several models relevant to the different issues addressed by the interventions discussed. In addition to thematic models, collaborative or complex-sensitive approaches were considered suitable in planning for systemic change.

7.3 Learning and adaptation

The importance of learning and adaptation has been supported by all interviewees unequivocally, particularly when navigating complexity, changing contexts, systemic approaches, and collaborative action.

> *"You need to learn, adapt, reflect, improve. I think that's important, especially in a partnership, where you're not necessarily a group of five people or five organisations. People will change, organisations will change, donors will change. you need to adapt to that ongoing reality. So yeah, it's vital to everything we do."* (Interviewee 8)

> *"Learning and adaptation needs to be absolutely an intrinsic part of how CSPs work. And particularly when it comes to systems change."* (Interviewee 11)

The interviewees perceived CSP4D to pose a great potential in creating the channels for learning, knowledge exchange and mutual capacity building.

> *"That's where I think the sweet spot exists in partnerships between corporates and social impact organisations. Where corporates can come in with their market driven knowledge. Those organisations can come with their social impact driven knowledge. And what happens when you combine those two. I think that's the sweet spot… So there's great opportunities in challenging this traditional donor model from philanthropy and stepping into more of a*

knowledge exchange between corporates and the social impact sector." (Interviewee 3)

"I think having CSPs, enables you to see that learning more clearly, partly because it's somehow difficult for one organisation to look at the different types of learning. Whereas if you have different organisations working on different parts of the problem, you can bring that different learning from different types of organisations and different people within the system together, to make a kind of more cohesive whole, to understand what you're doing better, to then, again, be more effective and efficient in what you do… CSPs can create new, different, better types of work through being able to learn and adapt and bring different capabilities together." (Interviewee 7)

7.3.1 Factors hindering learning and adaptation

Despite broad consensus on the value of learning and adaptation, the interviewees appointed at several intrinsic and extrinsic factors that hinder this process, shown in Figure 10. It was mentioned that oftentimes, learning is 'lost' in the process of monitoring and evaluation, as the implementation strategy, timeframe or budget do not support it. Particularly relevant in the process of designing for systemic change, which is acknowledged to take time, the implementing strategy and financial constraints are closely linked to practical barriers for learning.

Hindering learning & adaptation	Supporting learning & adaptation
Budget & resources	Donor relations
Lack of individual practice to learning	Trust & allowing to fail
Lack of organisational culture for learning	Feedback & stakeholder consultations
Institutional resistance & political behaviour	Monitoring & evidence-based learning
Implementing strategy & methodological limitations	Organisational interest & capacity
ODA architecture	Reflection & reiterative project management

Figure 11. Factors hindering and supporting learning & adaptation

A lack of acceptance for failure and the widely and deeply rooted practice of glorifying results when reporting to donors, combined with a lack of individual and organizational culture for reflection and change can all negatively affect learning and adaptation within the scope of the intervention.

> *"Some partners might be very set in their ways traditional kind of service delivery type agencies. I don't know if it's willingness or it's just they're not used to working in this more kind of adaptive, systemic change, institutional strengthening, kind of way of working"* (Interviewee 4)

> *"Most programmes that I've seen, go about strategy implementation. Well, there's lots that happened before implementation and implementation is itself is a bumpy road and you will need to iterate, iterate, iterate… Feedback loops. It's all about that iteration"* (Interviewee 3)

The implications of engaging in a learning process within organizations, their workload and risk management can result in a form of institutional power politics expressed through resistance to change. Finally, implications of defining learning and the learning methodology, setting indicators and parameters that fit the problem addressed, the culture as well as the configuration of the partnership pose challenges as well. The concern about power to decide on these matters came into discussion as an issue that shapes the course of learning and adaptation for the CSP and the designed intervention.

> *"Now, in terms of learning, and adaptation, I think one always needs to be mindful that those in charge with the day-to-day management of the partnership or those that provide the US dollars to it, are often in a privileged position in terms of setting information gathering needs, in terms of setting the learning agenda and in terms of establishing when adaptation should occur and adaptation to what."* (Interviewee 10)

7.3.2 Factors enabling learning and adaptation

Some factors have been raised by the interviewees as especially enabling learning and adaptation. Here too, having an adaptive, reiterative, and systemic, long-sighted management practice is essential, alongside establishing a relationship of trust with the donor, allowing for transparent reflections, and learning opportunities to be created based on failures. While in some cases funders and implementing organisations adopt a more tolerant approach to failure, it is still a sensitive topic that impedes organisations and interventions from evolving into being more transparent and hence more adaptive.

> *"A crucial point to be able to do that is to negotiate with your donors on this approach. And to say, do you agree that we have this approach that we go along, learn together? It's also a question of longer-term engagements. So learn at the level of projects, or we learn at the level of programmes, longer term, as organisation or as a system"* (Interviewee 6)

The interviewees also raised the need for constant stakeholder consultations, to capture changes in the systems, problems and overall, the changing context of the intervention. For this, a rigorous monitoring and evaluation system is required to anchor any adaptation needed in sound evidence. Besides from extrinsic drivers, the interviewees raised the issue of having an intrinsic, institutional drive for learning – an issue that requires strong internal management and organisational capacity.

> *"To do these, to be able to influence structures and donors and systems, wherever you're working, you need evidence to show what you're doing, show your effectiveness, show what you can do, and also to learn from what they are doing, because they also have knowledge that they produce at that level."* (Interviewee 9)

> *"I think for adaptation or learning to occur, it requires a whole range of things, one of which is a genuine motivation, an internal motivation, and an external incentive to do these things."* (Interviewee 10)

Finally, when discussing the role of CSPs in disseminating to the wider community and to other stakeholder groups from the systems targeted by the intervention, interviewees had split views about the success of their own interventions in managing to pass on learnings of the intervention. Here, the implementing strategy and the adoption of learning and dissemination of knowledge as an integral part made a difference in the way in which some CSP4D managed to engage externally. Having numerous partners engaged in the CSP4D and documenting the process represented a supporting factor. Some development actors have engaged in communicating flagship reports, organised webinars, and managed to bring a wide range of stakeholders together for dissemination and learning. Resources, capacity, and interest paid by the development actor in facilitating this process were all considered important in the process.

7.4 Other findings

In addition, the interviewees raise critical questions regarding the very understanding and rationale of systemic change. These considerations span challenges over how interventions are designed to achieve systemic change and the CSP4Ds' role in the process, as collaborative forms of planning.

> *"One challenge is that systemic change is often thrown around and is something that we often put up as an aspiration. But we're often very imprecise about what it means and what it means to whom. And without clarity around that it's difficult to realistically pursue it" (Interviewee 10)*

> *"There aren't that many partnerships that are aimed at shifting systems explicitly. That's one thing you should know, if it sounds like an attractive idea, that, of course. But the reality is, there's just not. Shifting systems is incredibly difficult, depending on the scope of your system. So most collaborations, most partnerships focus on a relatively small part of any system to try to shift some element of it."* (Interviewee 11)

8. Discussion

Anchored in Luhmann's theory of social systems, the ontological point of departure for the research, had systems viewed as dynamic constructs, which respond to feedback coming from the external environment (Kihlström, 2012; Albert, 2019). Moreover, influenced by the CAS, social systems have been regarded as complex, interconnected and interdependent networks (Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017; Lomax, 2019). With both theories accepting systems manifesting a dynamic and adaptive behaviour, the research adopted the view that inherently, social systems are in a constant state of change (Green, 2016), allowing for the study of systemic change to be carried.

In addition to the grand theories, the research borrowed from middle range theories such as applied systems theories on programmed/non-programmed decisions (Dekkers, 2017a) and the SSM (Checkland, 1999), in understanding systemic change as a process with certain characteristics. These epistemologies informed the systemic methodology employed as analytical framework for primary data collection and thematic content analysis. The discussion below merges learnings from the desk research, the analysis of empirical data and the theoretical grounding in reasoning on the phenomena.

8.1 Systemic change: why ontologies and epistemologies matter

In line with the available research (Clarke and Crane, 2018), the empirical data informs that the concept of systemic change suffers from vague understanding, spanning methodological implications for planning. Reasoning on possible causes for this conceptual proliferation and its implications on intervention design, it can be argued that misalignments between systems ontologies and epistemologies can be a driving factor.

On one hand, some data appoint that systemic change is seen as a goal too complex and grand to achieve. When systemic change is viewed as an end-goal, the world of systems is perceived as engineerable – a view supported by HSM (Khisty, 1995). Moreover, the data reveals that linearity and short-sightedness are unsuitably applied vis-à-vis the complexity of the problem addressed. Traditionally associated with straightforward, well-defined issues linear or A to B approaches fall short in addressing complex issues, as informed by applied systems theory and the existing literature (Dekkers, 2017; Green, 2016). Linking back to the ontological view proposed by the CAS, the world of systems is established on complex and dynamic connections and dependencies, which can manifest an unpredictable behaviour, thereby, rejecting the

mechanistic worldview of engineerable or optimizable systems (Innes and Booher, 1999). Also, as informed both by the existing literature (Findlay-Books et al., 2007; Linnenluecke et al., 2017), and the empirical data, CSP4D are placed in the realm of networked systems, dependencies, and complex problems. Therefore, when working to address complex issues such as climate change, conflicts or inequities, perceiving systemic change as an end goal and planning to address it through the already-problematised methods, raises concerns of ontological and epistemological misalignment. In this context, CSP4Ds are facing an unsuitable (conceptual) foundation and the wrong (methodological) tools in planning for systemic change.

On the other hand, the empirical data suggests that learning and adaptation is highly valued by development practitioners in the context of intervention design, transpiring a process-oriented approach to systemic change. In line with the theoretical grounding proposed for this research, this approach is supported by the epistemology of SSM, which accepts systemic change as a learning-based, reiterative process (Checkland, 1985). Findings on the importance of long-sighted, non-linear interventions, systemic thinking, and flexibility in approaching outcomes, and the need for learning and adaptation in the process, fall in line with the requirements of complex issues informed by non-programmed decision and the SSM, but also by the available literature (Green, 2016; Quarshie and Leuschner, 2018). It can be argued that this approach proposes ontological and epistemological coherence between the conceptual understanding of systems, systemic change, and the methodological implications of intervention design, relevant for the complexity of problems and social systems, which CSP4Ds are often formed to address. However, although development practitioners value these approaches, numerous factors challenge their adoption, obstructing a process that can provide ontological and epistemological alignment and equip CSP4D with better conceptual and methodological resources to address systemic change. Bearing great consequences on CSP4D potential to drive systemic change, such individual, institutional and structural barriers become increasingly important and worth pursuing in further research.

8.2 CSP4D from theoretical advantages to empirical challenges

Firstly, the ontology of social systems provides a fundamental understanding of CSP4Ds in the world of systems, with implications on their role and ability to drive systemic change. Informed by Luhmann (Kihlström, 2012; Albert, 2019), CSP4Ds can be understood as presence-conditioned *interaction systems*, temporally joined to address certain issues through

development cooperation, where different constituent actors can be seen as sub-systems. As an interaction system, CSP4Ds represent an extension and a contribution to the (complex) functional systems in which they are formed, and to its system-specific communication. As such, being formed through the collaboration between different sectors, i.e. non-profit, public, private, from the political, economic, educational, health system etc., it can be argued that CSP4Ds benefit from having 'translators' or 'gatekeepers' into different (sub-)systems, building on the advantage of system-specific communication inherited by partners of varied systems background. This could enhance the organic process of system adaptation and change, made possible through positive feedback loops, ontologically underpinning CSP4D to the process of systemic change.

Moreover, the CAS capitalises the importance of CSPs in connection to networked social systems, informing that enhanced flows of information can improve the system's performance and innovation (Innes and Booher, 1999). Furthermore, the role of CSP4Ds is epistemologically supported by the applied system theory on non-programmed decisions, which reasons that multi-stakeholder collaborations, together with creativity and innovation are essential in tackling complex issues and driving systemic change (Dekkers, 2017a). Based on numerous connections with the social systems theory, CSP4Ds can be seen as fundamentally connected to systemic change, possessing some essential characteristics of ontological and epistemological roots.

However, the empirical data informs that CSP4Ds experience various challenges in the process planning for systemic change as connected to development interventions, turning inherent advantages into collaborative barriers. Silo-thinking, difficulties in understanding each other's processes, institutional backdrops, and competing organisational and individual motives can create imbalances and fragmentation within the CSP4D, aligning empirical findings with the challenges identified in the literature (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Andrew and Entwistle, 2010; Tudler and Keen, 2018). Moreover, challenges experienced in the sectors/systems that partners come from, such as accountability, transparency or institutional weakness, can negatively affect the collaboration between partners, the designed intervention and fundamentally, the CSP4D's potential to engage in systemic change. These challenges are found to be accentuated by increased diversity among partners and international operations. Why?

Based on Luhmann's interaction systems, the constituent actors carry the mark of their system of origin, including the system-specific communication and its functional differentiation (Albert, 2019). These characteristics can translate into differences that pose challenges in understanding each other, rather than creating the synergies and collaborative advantages supported by the rationale of sectorial differentiation informed by the literature (McQuaid, 2000; Andrews and Entwistle, 2010). Consequently, despite their temporal and purposeful formation, interaction systems do not readily establish an understanding of different sub-systems' modus operandi, providing no assurance that the function of the interaction system outweighs that of the system's origin. This can result in silo thinking, partners' challenges to align to a new purpose and competing motives. It also helps understand why increased diversity and number of partners created challenges for CSP4Ds in gaining contextual understanding. However, both Luhmann and the CAS are considered limited in reasoning on motivation and influence, particularly at the individual level.

Data also showed that sub-sector differentiation becomes more apparent in the context of international development, where CSP4Ds partners display unequal capacity, know-how, financial and decision-making power, an issue also identified in the literature (Findlay-Brooks and Visser, 2007). Moreover, in line with the literature (Selsky and Parker, 2005; Findlay-Brooks and Visser 2007), empirical data informed that when ill-managed, such differences can create incentives and serve to strengthen existent power structures within the CSP4D and vis-à-vis the systems of the intervention. Aiming at understanding these challenges, Luhmann's theory of social systems sheds some light, by seeing power intrinsic to interaction and communication, therefore, accepting its pervasiveness in social systems, including interaction systems (Borch, 2005). However, raising the question of governance, ethics and collaborative pre-conditions, Luhmann provides limited theoretical grounding to understanding how and whether interaction systems could be governed, so that inherent power can be catalysed and managed equitably, for the better outcome of their presence-conditioned, purposeful formation.

Approaching CSP4Ds as interaction systems helps understanding that inherent system differences can pose challenges to communicating and planning collaboratively. On one hand, this knowledge can help anticipate and increase awareness of the management strategies required by CSP4Ds. On the other hand, it can help understand that some ontologically rooted differences might not be transcended, inviting for a critical, context-based decision on whether the advantages of CSP4D outweigh their challenges in tackling a given issue.

8.3 Methodological considerations

Informed by the epistemology of SSM (Checkland, 1985) and applied systems theory (Dekkers, 2017a), systems epistemologies informed three analytical dimensions relevant to intervention planning following a systemic methodology: systemic contextual understating, the designed intervention and learning and adaptation. The next sections discuss challenges identified for CSP4D and concludes by proposing an adapted framework on collaborative planning for systemic change.

8.3.1 Systemic contextual understanding

Data informs that overall, CSP4D have a positive contribution to this process, albeit some challenges were experienced, imposing some changes to the methodology. Particularly, the concept of root problems was considered unsuitable in the context of addressing complex problems. The SSM proved to be limited by insufficiently reflecting on the implications of problem complexity in intervention planning, calling for an understanding of 'root causes' without differentiation. While applied systems theory on programmed/non-programmed decisions acknowledges the role of complexity in planning, root causes are indicated as a key component in addressing complex issues. Having accepted the CAS and the pervasiveness of complexity surrounding social systems and their interactions, the research proposes an improved methodology, highlighting the variability of employing the concept of root causes in connection to problem complexity, if at all. Adaptability to complexity falls in line with the available literature on complex-sensitive planning (Linnenluecke et al., 2017; Tudler and Keen's, 2018).

Moreover, data discussed power as a complex concept, which requires increased sensitivity to positionality, creation of incentives and reinforcement of power structures. The updated methodology introduces power analysed both as an outward process – concerning the systems of the intervention – and as an inward process – concerning the CSP4D, internally. While the first is adopted under this dimension, the second will be introduced in a subsequent dimension of the methodology. Outward power analysis borrows from the principle of deep equity (Petty and Leach, 2020), in analysing and devising an equitable planning process. Both analyses have the purpose of increasing awareness and sensitivity to power, for better management and assumed role of CSP4D when planning for systemic change, an issue also identified in the desk research (Green, 2016).

8.3.2 The designed intervention

It has been acknowledged that the lack of contextualisation, local engagement, and participation throughout planning could derive into culturally and empirically unfit models for development intervention. Also capitalised by the SSM as comparison and adaptation of theoretical models (Khisty, 1995), the research internalizes contextualisation and participation into the adapted methodology.

Moreover, in line with the available literature (Selsky and Parker, 2005) the empirical data highlighted that when planning is not sensitive to the power dynamics existent in local systems, CSP4Ds can enhance conflicts and reinforce power structures, entrusting and clustering resources inequitably. As such, the intervention would fundamentally fail to address systemic change according to its definition in the literature, where systemic change is rooted in the premise of altering a system's function or structure, to improve a social-economic or environmental issue (Senge et al., 2006). The research borrows from Petty and Leach (2020), introducing deep equity in the methodology of planning for systemic change by CSP4D.

The empirical data is fully in line with non-programmed decisions, the SSM and the available literature (Green, 2016; Linnenluecke et al., 2017; Tudler and Keen, 2018; Quarshire and Leuschner, 2018), defending the importance of systemic thinking and multi-stakeholder interventions in planning for systemic change. Likewise, supported by the ontology of CAS (Innes and Booher, 1999; Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017; Lomax, 2019), the epistemology of SSM (Checkland, 1985), and by the existing literature (Green, 2016), planning for systemic change requires an adaptive, non-linear approach, a process mutually-supported by learning and adaptability - introduced in the next section. The improved methodology proposes an increased focus on flexibility and non-linearity in planning and managing development interventions, without denying the importance of rigour and evidence-based monitoring and evaluation.

8.3.3 Learning and adaptation

Learning and adaptation have been supported by the existing literature (Abercrombie et al., 2015; Green, 2016; Tudler and Keen, 2018; Quarshire and Leuschner, 2018), the ontology of social systems where learning and feedback loops support the system's adaptive process (Germain, 1978; Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017b) and by the epistemology of SSM, which accepts learning as an integral part of the cyclical intervention design connected to a changing

environment (Checkland, 1985). However, the empirical data informs that various internal and external factors hamper learning, weakening one of the core processes by which CSP4Ds can engage in systemic change.

Issues of power to decide on the course of learning, individual and institutional resistance, or limited internal apparatus to think and to act reflectively, reiteratively and adaptively, raise concerns regarding the structures and capabilities that enable learning at the individual, institutional and partnership level. The lack of adaptability also conflicts with the CAS, where systems are seen to poses a non-linear behaviour (Innes and Booher, 1999), building on the need for planning that complements the dynamic behaviour of the system. Failing to adapt to this, places the intervention on a fundamentally unsuitable and deficient track to engage in systemic change.

Provided the unquestionable role of learning and adaptation, the research proposes an improved methodology that adopts a multi-level, systemic understanding of learning and adaptation as an intrinsically, and extrinsically driven process. As such, the dimension proposes an analysis of the 'learning landscape', including the assessment of the processes and capacities that support learning internally and its adoption withing the designed intervention.

Moreover, as the findings revealed that dissemination of learning is fragmented and limited when it comes to external systems, the research proposes an increased and integrated approach to disseminating learnings, as an opportunity to engage and support access to knowledge among the local community, or adjacent sectors and systems. Engaging in this process can build on the potential of partners to act as gatekeepers into sub-systems of origin, capitalising on the ontological advantage of interaction systems that inherit system-specific communication (Dekkers, 2017b) – a strength seldomly enacted at the moment.

8.3.4 CSP4D internal analyses & governance.

It was found that none the SSM and the applied systems theory provide sufficient consideration on intervention planning in the context of collaborative action. Based on the importance assigned by the empirical data to the issues of capacity building, internal management of motives, representation, ethics, and equity in the governance of CSP4D and their collaborative outcomes, the research concludes by adding a fourth dimension to the methodology on collaborative intervention planning for systemic change: internal analyses & partnership

governance. Having learned that power dynamics within the CSP4D influence their outcomes on all other dimensions, the fourth dimension, includes internal power analysis, with a view on understanding motives, incentives, and their weight in the planning process, thereby engaging in power-sensitive partnership governance. Internal analyses, equity and a power-sensitive governance is increasingly important in the context of international development, where CSP4Ds gather partners from varying income countries, with various capacities and access to resources, being vulnerable to the power imbalances and issues raised before.

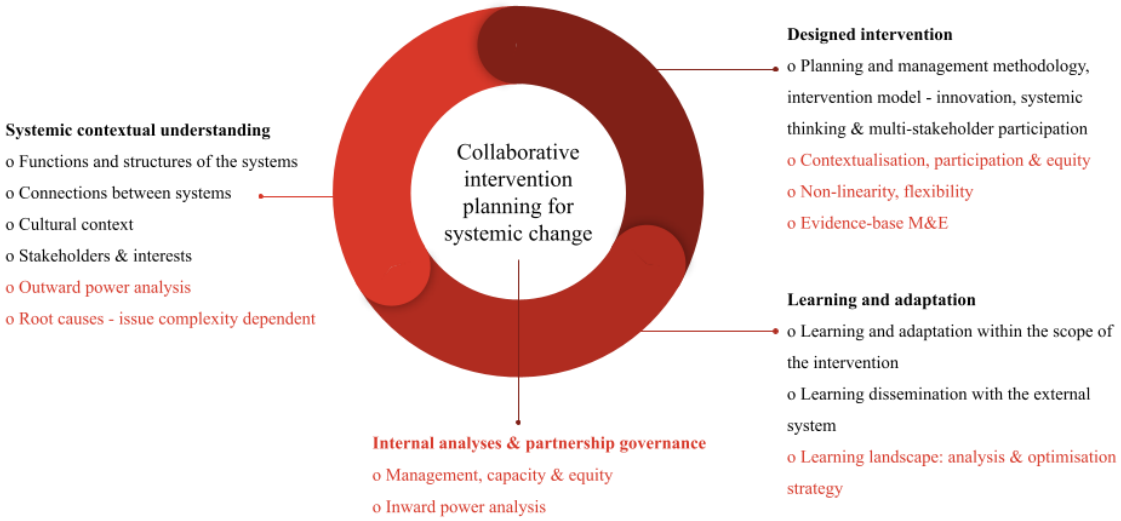


Figure 12. Updated framework on collaborative intervention planning for systemic change

9. Conclusion

Rooted in the belief that together, actors can leverage each other's resources, knowledge, and capacity to achieve common goals, CSP4Ds hold a unique collective power that could fuel the ambition to drive systemic change and tackle complex issues. However, conceptual limitations, methodological constraints, and the ontological and epistemological misalignment between the two, place CSP4Ds on a path full of challenges. The research drew on existing literature, empirical qualitative data, thematic content analysis, and a complex theoretical reasoning based on systems ontologies and epistemologies to tackle these gaps.

Acknowledging that conceptual understanding underpins the planning methodology of systemic change, the research contributes by reasoning that systems ontologies and epistemologies carry an essential role in understanding the connections and interdependencies between how social systems, systemic change and planning are understood. Approaching systemic change as an end goal or a process does matter, carrying implications on the tools with which CSP4Ds are equipped to engage in the process. The research raises the need for more comparative inquiry on the split conceptual understanding and the implications on planning methodology of these two parallel views among practitioners and academia.

Having placed CSP4D in the world of systems ontologies provided important considerations for reasoning and understanding the strengths as well as the challenges of collaborative planning. While having been acclaimed for their synergistic value, CSP4D are troubled by their sub-system backdrop and the barriers it creates in understanding each other. The research concludes by raising the importance for a critical and ontologically rooted evaluation of partnerships, removing the temptation of promoting them as the panacea to all complex challenges. However, as CSP4D are heterogenous constructs, more research is required to understand the relationship between these challenges and different factors that diversify CSP4Ds.

Furthermore, anchored in systems epistemology and an analysis of the empirical challenges experienced by CSP4D, the research brought a methodological contribution. An updated systemic methodology has been introduced, tailored for the requirements of collaborative planning, in the context of development cooperation. Here, systemic contextual understanding,

the designed intervention, learning and adaptation, CSP4D governance and equity are equally important pillars of the collaborative planning methodology for systemic change. Further action research is recommended (Burns, 2015) to apply, collect data, reflect and evaluate the suitability, strengths and further improvements required by this methodological framework.

Looking at conceptual and methodological development of systemic change through the theoretical lenses of this research, one can accept that this evolution requires a reiterative, learning-based, and adaptive process. Like learning, systemic change can be nurtured through intrinsic and extrinsic drivers, continuously informed by inclusive and equitable creation and access to knowledge and supported through collaborative governing structures. The research concludes on the increased need for democratic, participatory and equitable creation and dissemination of knowledge, a sustained process of decolonising knowledge (Mitova, 2021). Here, the role of 'traditional' and Western knowledge holders becomes increasingly important, building on the need for CSP4D to create more platforms for engagement and knowledge dissemination.

From helping gain contextual understanding of systems and problems, to challenging power structures, increasing ownership, and engaging in the co-creation of knowledge and innovative intervention models inspired by non-traditional partners, CSP4Ds show notable potential in driving systemic change. However, CSP4D must not be naively assessed in a power vacuum. With inherent structural challenges still raising concerns on the governance of partnerships and collaborative planning, CSP4D face both great challenges and opportunities to bring across improvements in the international development sector. Finally, as both concepts could benefit from further conceptual and methodological development, including more research on aligning systems ontologies and epistemologies in practice, testing, and evaluating new systemic planning methodologies, sensitive to complexity and collaborative planning context, the research concludes by calling for a more conscious use and consideration for the claims made under the umbrella of systemic change and CSP4Ds.

Limitations on the conclusions

It must be acknowledged that CSP4Ds and the development cooperation sector are highly heterogenous and thus, conclusions cannot be generalised. Factors such as geographies, CSPs formation, purpose, and governance, as well as socio-economic and cultural factors affect the experiences reflected in this research. As this research did not focus on the comparison between

these variables, further comparative, single or multiple case research design (Bryman, 2012) could provide a deeper understanding of the implications that thematic development fields, partnership particularities or the issues address spawn over the conceptual and methodological challenges experienced by CSP4Ds in planning for systemic change.

Despite its acknowledged limitations, the theoretical robustness and the in-depth primary qualitative data collected for the purpose of this phenomenological-inspired research, provide an important starting point for further investigations. The large corpus of data collected allowed for critical selection of the material included, which shaped the discussion and the conclusions of the research. Adjacent topics discussed, such as collaborative pre-conditions of CSP4Ds or implications for the future of development sector have been subject to practical limitations, raising opportunities for further research.

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Appendices

1. Interview guide

Expert interview guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. Your willingness to dedicate your time and your input is highly appreciated! Below, you will find the interview guide, encompassing my research question, intended research definitions and finally, the interview questions, grouped under relevant themes, each with a short insight into the theory and its relevance for the research. In addition, you will receive an informed consent form prior to the interview. Please do not hesitate to contact me, should you have any additional questions!

Daniela Nemeti Baba
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Research Definitions

The following definitions have been elaborated based on the theoretical grounding of the research.

Cross-sectoral partnerships for development	Cross-sectoral partnerships for development (CSP4D4D) are bilateral or multilateral collaborations between not-for-profit, public and/or private organisations, who contribute financial resources, knowledge, expertise, and/or or other resources necessary to achieve common socio-economic or environmental goals, as supported by the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.
(Complex) Social systems	Social systems are ensembles of structures, processes and agents (sub-systems) that serve a system-specific function or purpose, dynamically responding to changes from the external environment through learning and adaptation, and which can be found in complex, interconnected and interdependent networks of systems.
Systemic change	Systemic change is the process aimed at influencing the system's function or structure, in order to tackle social or environmental issues existent in the system, which requires gaining understanding of the system, applying systemic planning methodologies and upholding learning and adaptation central to the process.
Development intervention	Programme or project subject to the collaboration of the CSP4D4D, designed to achieve social or environmental development goals, in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

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Abbreviations

CAS	Complex adaptive systems
CSP4Ds	Cross-sectoral partnerships
SSM	Soft Systems Methodology

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Theoretical background and research rationale

The theoretical point of departure for the research is grounded in Niklaas Luhmann's social systems theory, which informs about functional differentiation (i.e. each system bears a function in the modern society, e.g. law, political, economic system etc.) and the dynamic behaviour of systems as a response to the feedback coming from the external environment (Kihlström, 2012; Albert, 2019). Moreover, the study looks at social systems as complex interconnected and interdependent networks, which increases their unpredictable and non-linear behaviour, as proposed by the theory of complex adaptive systems (CAS) (Eidelson, 1997; Dekkers, 2017; Lomax, 2019). Both theories accept systems as manifesting a dynamic and adaptive behaviour, allowing for the study of systemic change to be carried. Having adopted the view of systems as epistemological social constructs, as proposed by the Soft-Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1985), the research looks at systemic change as a learning process, and not as an end-goal on itself.

Having defined the scope of the research as focusing on the impact of cross-sectoral partnerships (CSP4Ds) on the process underpinning systemic change, has opened to three dimensions worth analysing: (1) the impact on understanding the context and the problem situation (connected to the intervention), (2) the impact on the designed intervention and (3) the impact on learning and adaptation. The three dimensions are looked at through the lenses of systems thinking, borrowing from the SSM. Finally, a fourth dimension borrows from the theory of communicative rationality, in looking at the collaborative pre-conditions that are necessary in order for the CSP4Ds to be able to affect systemic change.

(1) Systemic contextual understanding

This dimension looks at how CSP4Ds impact the understanding of the local functional systems and the (complex) connections between them, of the cultural and political contexts, of stakeholders and their interests, of the root causes and finally, of the different forms of power relevant to the context of the intervention. According to Niklaas Luhmann and Michel Foucault, power is pervasive in all relationships and it can be expressed as a form of communication, linking the concept of power to one of the core processes of social systems – communication. Moreover, in his book 'How Change Happens', Duncan Green talks about the concept of power, as playing an essential role in driving or hindering change in complex social systems and thereby, in

the success or the failure of an intervention. He speaks of the power created when working with alliances (such as in the case of CSP4Ds), and divides power into three forms of expression: visible, hidden (e.g. lobbyists) and invisible power (e.g. engrained beliefs in what is good/bad, possible/not possible). The interview will look at power from an internal and an external stand as connected to the intervention and the CSP4D.

(2) Designed intervention

The theoretical grounding has informed that the intervention methodology and the choice between relevant planning and implementation models, are affected by the degree of complexity associated with the system and the problem situation. For example, the participatory, process-oriented planning suggested by the SSM, as well as systems thinking, creativity, innovation and experiment-based interventions are more suitable when designing an intervention for complex systems and intricate problems. This dimension also looks at how working in CSP4Ds the planning methodology and the model of the designed intervention, the feasibility and cultural appropriateness of the designed intervention, and its impact on driving creativity and innovation.

(3) Learning and adaptation

According to the theory of social systems and complex adaptive systems (CAS), feedback loops and learning support the system's capacity to respond and adapt to changes and stimuli coming from the external environment. In the context of planning and managing an intervention, the SSM informs that this cyclical learning process is made possible through debates and adjustments, thereby impacting the alignment between conceptual models designed for the intervention and the external reality. This dimension looks at how CSP4Ds affect learning and adaptation as an inner process connected to the designed intervention and as an external process, engaging with the systems where the intervention takes place.

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Interview Questions

First, could you please describe your experience working with CSP4Ds and/or 'systemic change' in the development sector?

Contextual understanding

1. Does working in CSP4D help understand the functions and the structures of the systems connected to the intervention (e.g. economic, educational, health system etc.)? How? If not, why not?
2. Does working in CSP4D help understand the connections and dependencies between the different systems relevant to the intervention?
3. Does working in CSP4Ds help understand the cultural and political context? How?
4. Does working in CSP4Ds affect the understanding of root causes underlying the problem situation within the system relevant to the intervention? How?
5. Does working in CSP4Ds help understand the different stakeholders and their interests?
6. Does working in CSP4Ds affect the awareness regarding the different forms of power present in the relevant system and which contribute to the problem situation? How?
7. Do these forms of power affect the CSP4D in the process of the designed intervention? How
8. How do CSP4D mitigate the effect of these forms of power?

The designed intervention

9. Does working in CSP4D affect the methodology used in planning the intervention and the model of the intervention (e.g. experiment-based, community-driven, participatory etc.)?
10. Does working in CSP4D affect the feasibility (logistics) and the cultural appropriateness of the intervention? How?
11. Does working in CSP4D support creativity and innovation? How?

Learning and adaptation

12. Does working with CSP4D support learning and adaptation within the scope of the intervention?

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13. Does working with CSP4Ds facilitate the communication/dissemination of learnings externally?

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Lomax, J., 2019. What is systemic change? Three components of a measurable definition.

2. Informed consent form

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Interview informed consent form
International Development and Management MSc
Lund University

Purpose
This interview serves as primary data collection for the graduation thesis part of the Master's programme International Development and Management at Lund University. The expert interview has been designed to help gain in-depth information on the topic of cross-sectoral partnerships (CSPs) and how they affect the process of systemic change in the context of international development cooperation.

Interview rationale
The interview aims at collecting in-depth data, in line with the theoretical grounding and the analytical framework, exploring the following points:

- How working in CSPs affects the contextual understanding of local systems and of the problem situation
- How working in CSPs affects the designed intervention
- How working in CSPs affects learning and adaptation
- How working in CSP affects power dynamics in the system and how power dynamics affect the partnership
- Pre-conditions for CSPs in affecting systemic change
- Challenges & opportunities for the international development cooperation sector

As this is an expert interview, interviewees are encouraged to ground their answers in empirical examples linked to their professional experience with the subject matter.

The research is carried under the supervision of Christopher Mathieu (christopher.mathieu@soc.lu.se), associate professor under the department of Sociology at Lund University.

Considerations for the interviewee

- Participation in the research is voluntary; the interviewee can decide to discontinue his/her participation at any moment
- The interviewee can opt not to answer any questions without providing additional explanation
- The interviewee can ask for any additional explanations on the conceptual definitions used in the research
- The interview will be recorded, only should the interviewee grant permission; the recording will be used for the interview transcript
- The interviewee can ask for a copy of the interview transcript
- The interviewee can opt to keep his/her identity secret. However, given the nature of the research, providing insights into the interviewee's professional experience is important in justifying the research methodology
- The data will be used for the dissertation thesis, which will be shared for assessment with the affiliated university

For questions, clarifications or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to the student conducting the research (I, Daniela Nemeti Baba) or to her supervisor (Christopher Mathieu).

Interviewer — Interviewee
Daniela Nemeti Baba

3. List of Interviewees

Interviewee #	Sector	Field of work	Role	Country base
Interviewee 1	Non-profit	Humanitarian aid	Humanitarian Manager	Sweden
Interviewee 2	Non-profit	Conflict and children rights	Country secretary general	Sweden
Interviewee 3	Social impact sector	Social entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship specialist	Sweden/The Netherlands
Interviewee 4	Non-profit	Sanitation, water & hygiene	WASH Advisor	UK
Interviewee 5	Non-profit	Conflict, disarmament & human rights	Programme Manager	Sweden
Interviewee 6	Non-profit	Various in sustainable development and humanitarian response	Management and Strategy Coordinator International Programmes	Switzerland
Interviewee 7	Non-profit	Humanitarian response & systems innovation	Director	Australia
Interviewee 8	Non-profit	Climate action, resilience & partnerships	Programme Lead	Sweden
Interviewee 9	Non-profit	Sustainable development, research, climate change & gender	Principal researcher & strengthening partnerships lead	UK

Interviewee 10	Non-profit	Various ODA, partnerships brokerage	Consultant, senior lecturer	Sweden
Interviewee 11	Non-profit	Partnerships thinktank & brokerage	Executive Director	UK

Table 7. List of interviewees

4. Internal power dynamics – interview extracts

Inherited (benign) power	*"So within any collaboration partnership, there is there is a power dynamic, obviously. And there will be power differentials. So just because there's a power imbalance does not mean that you have to run the partnership with that power imbalance."* (Interviewee 11)
Individual agendas & interests	*"There are multiple layers. It's the way in which those individuals engage and represented don't represent an organisation that often has bearing on the success or something."* (Interviewee 10)
Financial (donor power) incl. conditionalities	*"These funds come with conditionalities. Then you're not looking at the capacity of the other partner, to be able to do what you want to do in the time that you give them [...] the whole capability system does not favour what you're asking for. So at the end of the day, we've had these imbalanced partnerships."* (Interviewee 9)
Decision making	*"We should be listening to the voices of those who have the most intrinsic knowledge, critical, often closest to the communities, often being seen as the least powerful. Actually, they bring in incredibly important results, which is that direct knowledge of communities. And if you don't (listen), because of the power imbalance, then you'll be making bad decisions and bad designs."* (Interviewee 11)
Institutional capacity	*"I think there is a there is a broader capacity issue, though, in terms of, in many cases, big development partners, or even big foundations have large numbers of very capable people who have got years experience to do this. [...] Whereas when you're dealing with partners that have a weaker capacity, it's more, it's often more difficult for them, I think, to come to the table as equals."* (Interviewee 10)
Language or knowledge	*"At the moment, the power is between the experts the researchers, and communities who know nothing. Who should give the information when you ask questions. That is not the case."* (Interviewee 9)
Organisational resistance (political behaviour and aversion to risks)	*"Those organisations are frequently grappling with an equally powerful need which is around risk management. The need for key political people not to be exposed the desire to avoid scandal, the desire for money to be sent on time, etc, etc. And those competing those very real and equally important various facts, agendas are difficult to negotiate."* (Interviewee 10)
Patronizing behaviour	*"I think there's another problem and that kind of patronised behaviour or patronise thinking of when it comes to business."* (Interviewee 1)
Mindsets & perceptions	*"The second thing is that, that people organisations don't know their own power. And so much around power imbalances are due to perceptions of power, as opposed to the reality."* (Interviewee 11)

Table 8. Interview extracts on internal power dynamics