

When to Use Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is a powerful approach that's typically used to solve complex problems.

Follow the steps below to assess the complexity of a specific problem your Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) project is trying to solve and to determine if a systems thinking approach makes sense.

1. Describe the problem you are trying to solve.

2. Assess the complexity of your problem.¹

In each row, check the box next to the statement that's more true of the problem you are trying to solve.

Clarity	We understand the problem and what causes it, and there is solid evidence that our proposed actions will have the intended effects.	We are not sure we understand the problem, let alone the solution.
Diversity of opinion	Stakeholders and experts generally agree about what to do.	Stakeholders and experts have many different opinions—and possibly even conflict—about what to do.
Interconnectedness	The problem is relatively self-contained and not intertwined with its broader environment.	There are diverse associations between the problem and the broader environment, and the environment (political, economic, etc.) is unstable and in flux.
Stability	The broader environment is stable and predictable.	The broader environment is unstable and dynamic.
Scope	We have a short-term goal.	We aim to make sustained change at a broad scale.

3. Determine if systems thinking is the right approach for your problem.

If you mostly checked boxes in the column on the...

- Left: **Your problem is not very complex. Systems thinking would not be helpful for solving it.**
- Right: **Your problem is complex. Systems thinking could be very helpful for solving it.**

¹ Adapted from Systems Practice by Omidyar Group