

CAPACITY BUILDING OFFER: EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF SYSTEMS PROGRAMMING

1. A CHANGED CONTEXT AND EMERGING TRENDS: In today's context of dramatic aid cuts, practitioners of systems programming (this includes both donors and their implementing partners) are well-positioned to absorb cuts, achieve their objectives and navigate the uncertain future of funding for a number of reasons:

- A broad consensus has emerged among development practitioners that systems thinking, including its guiding principles and practices, is a cost-effective means to achieve and sustain development investments in economic and social sectors by leveraging the skills and resources of system actors.
- The major constraint practitioners face in managing systems programs for durable change at scale is time, not money. It takes time for motivated system actors to innovate, adopt and adapt inclusive business and service models, expand the type and nature of their relationships with other system actors and gather the evidence needed to influence a broad mix of actors to shift the system norm toward more inclusive and resilient economic growth.
- Development organizations can play a critical catalytic role by accelerating this system change process because they can establish effective working relationships with many different system actors simultaneously.

The implication of aid cuts on practitioners of systems development can be summed up with this catch phrase: “do more with less” in achieving program goals.

Donors with a portfolio of systems development investments are likely rethinking:

- The number, size, scope, outreach, the short and longer-term impact of their program portfolio, and their ability to leverage system resources to invest in positive change.
- The responsibility to “think systems” (including its boundaries and how to strengthen the coherence between the actions of system actors) should be shared among donors, implementers, enterprises, representative bodies and public institutions.
- How best to configure donor and implementer partnerships so that they can do more with less: smaller teams of differing staff composition (more local, less expatriate staff), a lean headquarter team with strategic/technical and operational/management skills, and the acceptance by all partners of their shared responsibility to “facilitate” desired system change.

Implementing partners with past/emerging systems development experience are likely rethinking:

- Their corporate capability statement to show their bona fides as a lean agile learning organization able to efficiently manage resources for effective system facilitation.
- The size, composition and expertise of technical management staff with proven leadership skills in team building, adaptive management and use of evidence-based decision making.
- How to address the accepted challenge that their staff will need to be “made ready” for their roles as effective facilitators with less in-house technical resources to guide and support them.

System actors with a vision of inclusive, resilient growth within their industry are likely re-thinking:

- The benefits of adopting a policy of inter-firm cooperation as their preferred growth strategy.
- How to support the improvement of better functioning systems in collaboration with private, public and donor-funded actors.
- How to capture and communicate their system relevance and contributions to better functioning systems.

An overarching question all system actors needs to ask is this: Who can manage these efficient systems development processes, leverage the skills and resources of many system actors, to innovate and invest in sustained outcomes at scale?

2. LESSONS IN PAST CAPACITY BUILDING INVESTMENTS: Two decades of market system development practice shows that program success is increased when both technical¹ and management know-how² coalesce to form an agile learning organization. Past investments by systems practitioners in technical know-how have paid dividends in improving program performance; however, complementary investments in learning organization set-up and management have been lagging behind.

¹ Understand system structure/behaviors to choose sectors, strategies, interventions, partners, monitor/measure performance.

² Aligning culture, staffing, skills with structure, strategy, and systems to achieve program goals.

Systems development practitioners recognize the importance of filling this leadership/management capacity gap as evidenced by BEAM Exchange's recent work on 'where do MSD leaders come from'³ and their core competencies.⁴ This research has confirmed that many system practitioners learn their practice "on the job" by working in a limited number of system development "hot spots" (projects and organizations relatively successful in applying this approach). Learning about systems development starts by having access to good training materials, trainers and case studies but ultimately needs to be sharpened 'at the coal face' by dealing on a day-to-day basis of managing a catalytic change process in complex adaptive systems.

Filling this systems leadership and management gap is all the more pressing when a systems approach is being used to address many development challenges beyond agriculture and business services to include financial sector development, private sector engagement and export trade, climate adaptation, building a circular economy, displacement and fragile and conflict-affected settings, education, health, women's economic empowerment, youth employment, and digital inclusion.

The management style, organizational set-up and leadership culture a systems program adopts is better fit for the purpose of durable change when:

- Management styles move away from a traditional command and control style required to deliver goods and services to the intended beneficiaries and towards a management style that transforms talent into high performing heterogeneous teams capable of managing messiness and embracing complexity through problem solving and solution seeking.
- Organizational set-up moves away from a multi-layered hierarchical structure where information flows from the field as an input to decisions taken alone by the leadership (often not steeped in on the ground reality) and towards a flat structure to minimize the distance information flows from the field to the leadership to allow for joint analysis and participatory decision making and ownership throughout the organization.
- Leadership culture moves away from one that rewards delivery of inputs against pre-defined targets and towards a culture that embraces messiness and rewards teamwork, open and honest enquiry in seeking lasting local solutions across multiple development challenges.

3. A CAPACITY BUILDING OFFER FIT FOR THIS CONTEXT: Opportunities Unlimited (OU), in partnership with The Mazi Group⁵, wishes to announce its program on *Effective Management of Systems Programming*. The learning objective of this immersive 12-month management capacity building program is to prepare working professionals in funders, contractors, NGOs, value-driven enterprises, impact investors and public sector institutions to ensure that they can effectively lead/manage/be part of systems development programming.

The program content is designed to enable its participants to zoom in on the management challenges and organizational implications of driving system outcomes in complex and messy systems. The core curriculum focuses on how-to:

- Set system boundaries for their relevance to wider systems change as the basis for engagement.
- Spot the right talent for agile systems learning.
- Organize, build and support high performing teams to advance a systems change strategy, implement/adapt interventions consistent with the shared values and objectives of the organization(s) involved.
- Make systems development relevant and influential in complex and messy circumstances by choosing the right partners and forming partnerships that put and keep local system actors in the driver's seat for as long as they exhibit the will/skill to drive systems change.
- Diagnose implementation problems and re-align system and organization functions to improve performance.
- Earn and sustain the trust and confidence among all stakeholders that agile learning against a shared system vision can deliver the best results.

4. LEARNING METHODOLOGY: BY EXPERIENCED MANAGERS FOR FUTURE MANAGERS: This program is patterned after an Executive MBA Program where qualified working professionals can learn on the job through a series of face-to-face, virtual activities and peer exchanges spread over a period of one year.

³ <https://beamexchange.org/resources/1886/>

⁴ <https://beamexchange.org/msd-competency-framework/msd-competencies/>

⁵ The Mazi Group (<https://www.mazi.group/home>), a collaborative of experienced systems development professionals, is partnering with OU on this initiative.

Program participants will engage in real-life problem-solving scenarios using organization management principles, processes and tools that have been honed by experienced systems development program leaders/managers.

5. WHO IS THIS PROGRAM FOR: The program targets staff in donor agencies, their implementing partners, system actors, and organizational change consultants with at least two (2) years' experience in systems development programming across a broad range of development challenges: private sector engagement and export trade, agriculture and business services, financial sector development, climate adaptation, building a circular economy, displacement in fragile and conflict-affected settings, education, health, women's economic empowerment, youth employment, and digital inclusion.

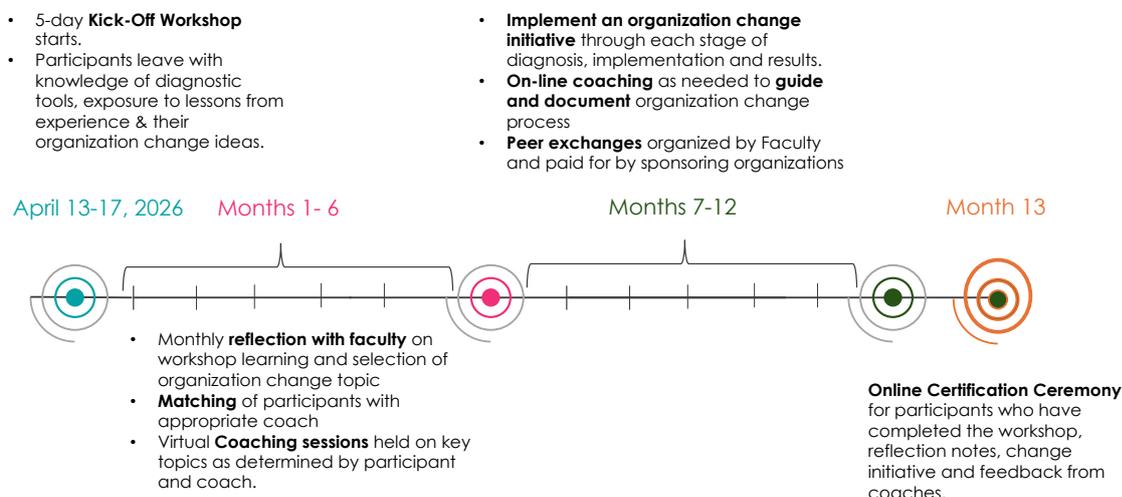
All participants can accelerate their movement along a career management track by gaining the knowledge, insight and practical tips required to lead and manage systems development programs. Operational programs and system actors can address systematically a priority organization change solution to improve program performance. Sponsoring organizations can address the challenge of staff development and operations support by outsourcing this function to a network of experienced team leaders and subject matter specialists. The community of practice can assess the benefits/costs of a more structured pathway for future leaders of systems development.

6. FACULTY AND RESOURCE PERSONS: Harald Bekkers, Fouzia Nasreen and Marshall Bear are the core faculty of this program. OU and its partner, The Mazi Group, can tap into their extensive networks of current and/or former systems development team leaders and organization management specialists (MRM, HR, Financial Management and Procurement). OU will match each participant with a range of qualified coaches for their selection.

7. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AND TIMELINE: *Diagram 1: Timeline of Activities* shows the timeline for this 12-month program. The five-day face-to-face kick-off workshop will be held at the **Serena Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya the week of April 13-17, 2026**. Prior to the workshop, participants will complete a needs assessment so that the teaching modules can be tailored to their needs. Each participant will leave the workshop with a range of ideas designed to implement a performance enhancing organizational change initiative to manage a systems development program within their sponsoring organization.

Post workshop, the program will sponsor monthly check-ins and individual coaching sessions to reinforce learning from the workshop and to guide the design and implementation of an organizational change initiative. Month 13 is the official end of the program when participants who have successfully completed the program will attend an online ceremony to receive their program certificates.

Diagram 1: Timeline of Activities



8. PRICE: The price for this 12-month program is **US \$2,950** for fifty-five (55) hours of instruction. The five day residential workshop includes thirty-five (35) hours of instruction. This price includes lunch and two coffee breaks. Participants will pay for their travel, lodging and per-diem for their evening meal. The workshop administrator will assist with visas, transfers, and hotel booking. This price also includes twenty (20) hours of post workshop coaching customized to the needs of each participant.

Participants and their sponsors can purchase additional coaching priced at **US \$500/5 hour coaching module** across a range of specialized topics in the core curriculum: Intervention Design, Finding Partners, Contracting and Managing Partnerships, MRM, Human Resources, Financial Management and Procurement.

9. Application Process: This program is open to applicants fluent in English with least two (2) years of experience in systems development programs either as a donor, implementer or consultant. Each applicant is required to submit:

- A resume which showcases lessons from past experience, training and publications relevant to this program's learning objective of effective management of systems development.
- A written application with pre-selected questions to assess the candidate's readiness and motivation to apply learning.
- An employer letter that confirms the candidate will be given the space and team support to seek practical solutions to priority organization issues.
- Two written references who can speak to the candidate's past experience in systems development.

10. Registration and Inquiries: Fill out the [online application form](#) or contact Harald Bekkers at hbekkers@opportunitiesunlimited.nl.

11. Early Bird Discount: 10% till 31 January 2026