

# *Systemic Change*

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Training Booklet n°11

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## *Introduction*

A Common Objective : **AIC, Let us Act Together Against Poverty !**

AIC is a dynamic association, it is part of a complex system where components constantly act upon each other in order to reach a common objective: **Acting Together Against Poverty.**

We are challenged by the current world situation where poverty increases on a daily basis. The requirement for stronger and more efficient cooperation is essential if we want our projects with and for the poor eventually to succeed and change the unfairness of their situation. Earning a livelihood is such an abiding preoccupation for many human beings, that it prevents them from planning their future. It is appalling to see that people like us, the very people we want to help, are also those who are stricken most unfairly by the negative impact of globalization, by climate changes, environmental destruction, disasters, wars etc.

Their cries are different but they come both from rich and poor countries.

When assessing the various projects that the AIC associations and local groups are conducting, we are happy that some of them have a real and positive impact of their recipients' lives. Many other projects, although also positive, do not succeed in changing the lives of the have-nots despite volunteers' efforts.

This twofold reality leads to several questions: **Why are certain projects not succeeding in changing the lives of the poor? Why are certain projects successful? Which strategies were used to obtain this success?**

Father General Gregory Gay and his advisors were challenged by these questions. Their thinking led to a new proposal on their part which was enthusiastically adopted by all those in charge of the various branches of the Vincentian Family. This idea is the Systemic Change development study.

A committee composed of members of the different branches of the Family was set up to this end.

AIC, with a permanent view to improvement, decided to study this Systemic Change more thoroughly. The members of the Executive Board and of the International Secretariat are training and starting to apply this Systemic Change approach.

We are today proposing a new training booklet.

It includes the basic training which is essential to become leaders of change in your various countries where different situations prevail.

If you meet this challenge, you will start to think systemically, which will enable you to carry out the necessary changes, not only in your own association, but also for the benefit of the poor and society, as the AIC operational guidelines indicate.

# *1. Together*

## **We are all related to Systemic Change**

We have all been “related to a system” at one point or another in our lives. As children, we looked at life as a whole, and did not try to interpret or attach labels to things.

A child is indeed able to see and understand that bonds exist, but later in life we work hard to forget about this. Our education consists of setting up strong partitions, in creating specific objects which are not related to the world. The problem is that by disconnecting these objects from their environment we learn to accept their autonomy and hence forget about the thousand bonds, practices, environments, magic and emotions which link them to the world and to ourselves.

## **Brief History of the systemic approach**

The idea of “a system” is found among the philosophers of Ancient Greece who saw the universe as **a whole, its parts being mutually dependant**. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance confirmed this theory. The Enlightenment philosophers rejected this approach and rather insisted on the prevalence of the individual versus his social environment.

The systemic approach was born after thirty years of interaction among a number of disciplines. It is not a new idea, but what is new is that these disciplines are integrated around an approach. It is a **cross disciplinary** approach, enabling us to better understand and describe a complex organisation. It is a new methodology enabling us to collect and organize our knowledge more efficiently and improve our way of acting.

### **Let us start to think systemically**

We live in a complex and diversified world and we try to understand its dysfunctions such as injustice, poverty and human suffering. Situations are sometimes so complex that we feel unable to understand them clearly. How can we improve this understanding? Systemic thinking is one solution, enabling us to develop capabilities and establish links, interrelations and strategies for change.

This approach implies a deep change of mentality, since a fragmented vision is replaced by an overarching vision. We consider the overall system (a person, a family, an organization or a country), its complexity and its dynamics; we focus on the connections and interactions between different parts of the system. It is an environmental and holistic approach with a view to achieving an objective in the future.

## What is systemic change?

Systemic change is a process which promotes the structural change of a whole system (in our case, a project, an action, society) by focussing on the relation and interaction of its different parts. Our objective is to radically change the life of the under-privileged. This “systemic change” aims to provide us with the specific instruments and strategies to carry out these changes.

This method gives us the tools which enable us to focus on the relationship rather than on the content of the components. It is a new approach which prevents us from using unwittingly the very mental models which are at the root of the problem we want to solve.



## ***2. Acting***

### ***I. STRATEGIES FOR A SYSTEMIC CHANGE***

The starting point used by the Systemic Change Committee's members was the thorough study of their own personal experience or of cases they had personally encountered. This case analysis enabled us to detect the various components of the projects and to identify a series of strategies leading to change. Hence, it will be possible to apply these strategies in the Vincentian Family projects worldwide. These strategies are good opportunities to change the unfair structures oppressing the poor.

In order to make them better understood, we have subdivided them according to their specific objectives. This classification is not rigid; on the contrary, it is interactive and flexible.

<b>Mission-orientated strategy (motivation and direction)</b>
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⇒ Poverty should not be considered as the inevitable result of circumstances, but as the result of unfair situations which can be changed by focussing on actions breaking the vicious circle of poverty.

⇒ Our Christian and Vincentian values and mission should lead us to design projects and create strategies, policies and guidelines.

⇒ Christian and Vincentian values and charisms should be inculcated while having a deep respect for local cultures.

### **Task-orientated strategy (organization)**

⇒ At the start, a sound analysis of local circumstances should be performed on the basis of concrete data, and all projects should be tailored accordingly.

⇒ A series of basic human needs – individual, social, spiritual and physical – should be addressed holistically, especially jobs, health care, housing, education and spiritual growth as an integral approach towards prevention and sustainable development.

⇒ Coherent strategies should be implemented, starting modestly by delegating tasks and responsibilities, providing quality services and respecting human dignity.

⇒ The project and its procedures should be systematized, institutionalized and assessed with measurable indicators and results.

⇒ The project should be self-sustaining. The human and economic resources needed for its sustainability should be ascertained.

⇒ Participation in budget preparation and comments on financial reports should lead to transparency. Careful control over financial management should be maintained.

## **People-orientated strategy**

**(Focusing on the poor as those persons most capable of changing their own situation)**

- ⇒ The needs and aspirations of the poor should be sought after in order to understand them and foster their self-esteem while creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual confidence.
- ⇒ The poor, including young people and women, should be involved at all stages: identification of needs, planning, implementation, assessment and review.
- ⇒ All participants in the project should be educated and trained and receive spiritual guidance.
- ⇒ Horizontal learning processes should be promoted within the local community, training competent trainers and visionary leaders inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul's doctrine.
- ⇒ Structural and institutional models should be set up, enabling communities to identify their resources and needs, to make informed decisions and exchange information and effective strategies within their own community as well as with others.
- ⇒ Civic education of individuals and communities should be promoted in order to create political awareness and commitment.
- ⇒ Internal solidarity tools existing among community members should be supported and respected.

## **Co-responsibility, networking and political action (participation and solidarity)**

- ⇒ Social co-responsibility and networking should be promoted by heightening social awareness at all levels – local, national and international – of the need to change the unfair conditions affecting the lives of the poor.
- ⇒ All stakeholders should participate in the building of a common vision: poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, the private sector, unions, media, international organisations and networks etc..

## ***II. Which projects? Selection criteria***

Not all projects require Systemic Change. Some projects, which are both useful and necessary, provide emergency solutions, solve specific problems, are positive and provide justified assistance. Projects leading to a Systemic Change should have inter alia the following characteristics:

### **1. PARTICIPATION**

No project can create a radical change without the participation of the poor

## **2. SOCIAL IMPACT**

Projects should have a long-term social impact. This impact will only be possible if the various systems involved interact in a given situation.

## **3. SUSTAINABILITY**

Projects should be self-supporting i.e. they should enable the setting-up of social structures which will change the lives of the poor and prevent them lapsing into the vicious circle of poverty. Systemic Change projects should eventually be financially autonomous.

## **4. MULTIPLYING EFFECT**

Systemic Change projects should be reproducible i.e. it should be possible to adapt them to different contexts. This is valid for the spirituality, techniques and strategies implemented in the project.

## **5. INNOVATION**

Systemic Change projects were able to bring about significant changes by replacing traditional practices by up-to-date and innovative practices.

## **6. JOINT RESPONSIBILITY AND NETWORKING**

A project will only produce a genuine change in the lives of the under-privileged if others share the same concept and if various systems are made to interact in order to reach the common objective. This of course involves state, church and other authorities.

We see that these criteria are closely linked to the AIC Operational Guidelines. In each case they are in line with what our Guidelines have been recommending since their creation in 1994.

The present 2007 – 2009 Operational Guidelines stress the importance of working in close cooperation with women and lay stress on joint responsibility and networking. The third guideline encourages us to involve society as a whole while increasing:

- *Networking in order to promote women*
- *Incentives which should involve society and encourage it to assume more responsibility.*
- *Awareness and use of communication resources to promote women's dignity.*

### ***III. “Systemic” Projects***

#### **a. Individual level: Maria**

It is essential to consider the person and have respect for her needs, aspirations and values. A deep sense of respect and a desire for women’s promotion and empowerment led the participants at the 2007 Assembly to formulate the 2nd AIC 2007 – 2009 Operational Guidelines.

**Support women to make them “personally responsible” since:**

- *Change should come from the person and her awareness of her situation.*
- *Each woman should find the resources to construct her own life plan within herself.*
- *Each woman is capable of bringing about change in her own culture.*
- *Each volunteer can contribute to creating conditions in favour of women’s development.*

Like all human beings, the poorest act as a system consisting of numerous sub-systems, which in turn interact with numerous other systems. They must all be considered if we want to bring about change. We are going to apply some of these principles to Maria, a woman who, like so many others, participates in our Vincentian projects.

- Maria is herself a system where other systems interact i.e. her body, her mind. She has physical, spiritual, moral and other needs. Her body is also a system in which

various parts interact in order to operate properly. If Maria has psychological problems, if she feels harassed or if she is dissatisfied, these conflict situations are not only going to influence her emotional balance but also her health in general.

- Maria is not an isolated entity. She is part of multiple systems which act upon each other and which are bound to affect her family, her community, her friendships, her environment etc. A system is an entity existing and operating as a whole through the interaction of its components.
- The system's components stick together and affect each other on a permanent basis.
- Maria will only be able to change her life if the components of the "Maria family" system agree to meet a wish, a need which is felt by all. The true change occurs when the components of the system interact in order to reach the common objective.
- It is not enough to work with the "Maria family" system. Indeed, this sub-system, in its turn, is part or is modified by larger systems such as community, society, social, church and government structures etc.
- In order to bring about a genuine change in Maria herself, her family and her community, a Systemic Change should be brought about i.e. a move from the individual to the collective or structural level.

## **b. Community level: the “Marillac” centre**

In 1991, a group of Vincentian volunteers created the Marillac Vincentian Centre in a poor suburb of San Luis Potosi, a town in the centre of Mexico. The work started with the suburb’s young people in order to fight gangs and drug addiction.

The centre’s population changed progressively. The young people’s mothers as well as children began to join. The Centre built a games library for children, and new activities were organized for the mothers: cooking lessons, handicrafts, hair-cutting and miscellaneous activities generally organized in this kind of centre.

After several years the number of activities had increased and the Centre continued to operate according to this pattern for more than ten years.

The Centre obtained considerable, mainly government support, and eventually had seven male and female teachers. An Adult Education Centre was finally set up. While the number of sponsors and pupils increased, the number of AIC volunteers decreased. Indeed, these volunteers considered that since the Centre could count on the necessary staff, their presence was no longer necessary. Gradually the teachers took over the Centre’s management and the volunteers conducted monitoring visits only rarely. The Vincentian charism became a mere idea and no longer a living and actual entity.

Courage was required to change this situation.

The volunteers realized that most women who attended the Centre’s activities were happy to learn something new and to spend some time relaxing. Little by little they had learned sewing, embroidery, knitting, cooking and cutting hair.

However, although they had learnt a great many things, most of them felt neither fulfilled nor happy. Their personal problems had not been considered. However, many had been subjected to domestic violence which inhibited their personal fulfilment.

### **Launching a thinking process and Systemic Change**

The volunteers had been alerted by the results of several assessment methods and encouraged by systemic approach proposals; they consequently decided to approach the problem from a different angle. Up to that moment their efforts had been limited to improving the courses. In other words, they repeatedly used the same thinking patterns, which had no real impact on the women's lives.

When they started to think systemically, the volunteers succeeded in radically changing the Centre. The violence to which these women had been subjected had to be eradicated. Therefore they had to work with the various systems interacting with those women.

The objective had to be redefined according to this wider perspective, and this new angle:

**In order to avoid and solve the problem of violence against women, it is necessary to contribute to women's empowerment and consequently bring about gender balance.**

Seen from this angle, by applying systemic approach principles, the project's beneficiaries were no longer only the women but also their husbands, companions and children. This was mainly true for young engaged couples who reproduced and perpetuated their fathers' patterns of violence.

The volunteers understood the urgent need to create a network and optimize the support of institutional organisations. They consequently obtained the support of several institutions interested in women's welfare such as the State Commission for Human Rights, town councils and state institutions, CORIAC and Women Institute...

Several activities have been proposed to reach these objectives. Such activities would promote gender balance and generate justice and equity:

- Individual assistance adapted to each woman's problems, and psychological assistance if required. The psychological problems encountered mostly by poor women are nervous breakdowns and chronic fears and anxieties, which are not taken into account or even noticed by their family circle. Women are regarded as the centre of the family and of society. They have to measure up to this idea without any consideration for their own feelings or demands.
- Advice and attention devoted to women's children when they have learning or other emotional problems.
- Medical or hospital treatment for "high risk" women who are prone to violence, or have health or emotional instability problems.
- Workshops and conferences with the following topics: Women's rights, self-esteem, efficient listening and communication capability, conflict, emotion and mood management etc..
- Participating in leadership workshops with a view to creating female community leadership.
- Workshops for men on manhood, responsible fatherhood and love without violence.

- Legal advice and mediation processes to avoid legal procedures.
- Various successful initiatives for young engaged couples.
- Connections with various public and private institutions on behalf of women and interaction with those public and private institutions in order to find solutions based on joint responsibility.
- Initiatives aimed at denouncing or bringing pressure to bear on the above mentioned bodies if they do not react in favour of non-violence towards women.
- Primary and secondary education open to all and courses to contribute to the empowerment of women as well as other persons in the community.

These proposals not only led the volunteers to restructure the Centre's facilities but also to increase the team's staff, including professional and trained staff according to the new requirements. Maria and the other women who participate in the Centre's activities have begun a process based on a systemic approach and thanks to which they gradually feel more and more fulfilled.

This process also constitutes a concrete implementation of the 2007 – 2009 AIC Operational Guidelines, mainly of the First Line:

- *Increase their commitment to solve women's poverty by:*
- *Creating a better gender balance*
- *Creating and developing discussion fora in order to pool problems, unite efforts, create leadership and find solutions.*
- *Training to promote Human Rights, mostly women's rights and their defence.*
- *Training to encourage political action with a view to creating and applying laws on behalf of women.*

### **C. Structural level: AIC Madagascar**

Madagascar is a mission country, where a great majority of the inhabitants live in poverty and where AIC is well established. The new groups made up of poor women have been created thanks to the support of the Daughters of Charity. Little by little this very young association, consisting of a few unconnected groups, became an important national network belonging to the AIC international network. Thanks to its networking and implementation of the association's Operational Guidelines, AIC Madagascar met its objectives, which would have been impossible if it had been isolated.

AIC Madagascar's story is full of pitfalls and hurdles, challenges and ordeals but mainly of actual achievements. The systemic approach was used by the Madagascan volunteers to bring about changes. This way of thinking

changed their own association and they became the catalyst which transformed both society and the poverty suffered by a significant part of the population.

The volunteers were outraged by the number of children begging in the streets and they took care of a group of children as well as of their own undernourished children, since malnutrition is one of the major scourges of this country. Gradually new groups were set up and the volunteers continued to distribute food to the children on a regular basis.

They worked hard to obtain food and staple products. Unfortunately in spite of their efforts, the situation did not change. The number of children suffering from malnutrition increased and they did not have sufficient food to feed them properly. The volunteers became aware that new methods were necessary to increase efficiency. For the first time they felt the need to assess their work and to take advantage of external support. Hence, they applied new strategies. In order to progress and improve their accountability, they had to initiate the change process. This was the beginning of a networking and change process which enabled them to obtain unexpected results.

Their systemic thinking enabled them to consider other aspects of the “children” system, i.e. the “family” “environment” and “society” systems.

They did not consider these various systems in isolation but concentrated on their interaction. The volunteers created the following short- and long-term activities:

## **Activities for children**

- Nutrition and weight control programmes
- Pre-schooling, informal education, educational programmes adapted to the children's age, task monitoring.
- Canteens
- Register of births, deaths and marriages.
- Specific assistance to less able-bodied children.

## **Activities for women**

They began with the integration of mothers and worked more specifically with widows and women separated from or abandoned by their husbands.

They became aware that it was not only necessary to train them to educate their children but also to give them the resources which would enable their empowerment.

They introduced the following new activities into their projects:

- Literacy
- Self-esteem and leadership
- Home economics
- Handicraft workshops
- Micro-credits
- Health insurance
- Health centres
- Mothers' clubs

- Agricultural training, rice, vegetable and moringa cultivation
- Occupational training
- Computer training, which is an important step towards empowerment, self-esteem and self-confidence.

### **Activities with fathers, husbands and companions**

It was acknowledged that men are a key component in the struggle to curb violence and create stability within couples, so that women can achieve empowerment and their children are educated in a climate of confidence and affection.

Here are a few of them:

- Responsible fatherhood campaigns which had a great impact in the country. These campaigns encouraged discussion and contributed to an awareness of this social problem. It would be possible to reduce the number of fatherless households and thereby prevent child poverty if these measures were to go hand in hand with education and an appropriate legal framework.
- Publication and distribution throughout the whole country of a manifesto on the importance of responsible fatherhood. The project called Women and men (Men and women?) united for a better world proved important to bring about a change of mentality.
- Publication of manifestos on violence against women, inter alia pro-life and against abortion.

## **Activities towards social change and networking**

To complete the process enabling them to accomplish Systemic Change, the volunteers became multiplying agents and stakeholders in social change, encompassing the poorest and whole communities in this large network. The desired change occurred and is used in their work. Their impact was felt not only in Madagascar but also in numerous parts of the world thanks to their participation in various international fora and meetings during which their voice (and through them that of the poorest) was heard and valued.

## **Connections with other networks**

AIC Madagascar showed the other centres that skills had to be pooled.

With AIC International, the other AIC associations, the Congregation of the Fathers of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

With local, national, government and Church institutions

With international organisations like UNICEF, which supports them with grants, teaching and school equipment and food. AIC Madagascar is recognized by UNICEF as a priority “partner” and Madagascan volunteers have been invited as “rapporteurs” to international meetings organized by UNICEF and other international organisations. In several instances, the women in charge of the Madagascar association were invited to organize workshops on their various projects, in particular at UNESCO, ECOSOC (Social and Economic Council I New York) UNDP (United Nations Development Programme ) and “Manos Unidas”. Their proposals concerning child nutrition, care for mothers and violence prevention have been heard and provide food for thought for decision- makers.

The Madagascar volunteers are committed to making a worldwide effort in order to eradicate poverty. They strengthened their efforts to integrate into the global system and achieve the United Nations Millennium Goals for Development, a worldwide initiative aiming at decreasing or even eradicating poverty.

The volunteers progressively understood the importance of thinking systemically and adjusting their work according to certain policies and strategies. They applied these strategies literally in order to achieve Systemic Change.

Here are a few of these strategies:

- Projects should be set up according to local conditions and the actual skills of the local team.
- Human requirements should be approached with a worldwide view in mind.
- Human physical and social capabilities should be enhanced through equal opportunities in the fields of health and education, thereby making the poor self-sufficient.
- The poor, mainly women, should be involved at all stages from identification of needs to assessment of the various projects.
- A respectful attitude should be maintained while working to improve mutual attention and confidence.
- Training, civic education and spiritual training of leaders and community members should be promoted.
- Unfair situations should be opposed and eradicated and a positive impact on public policies should be created thanks to political actions, social joint responsibility and networking.

- Respect for human rights should be promoted by acting together with a prophetic attitude to the causes of injustice.

This change process transformed the entire AIC system by giving it the models which were used in the association policies and which also demonstrate concrete application of the three 2007 -2009 AIC Operational Guidelines:

- *Enhancing the commitment to solve women's poverty*
- *Supporting women on the path to "personal responsibility"*
- *Making society as a whole aware of its responsibilities.*

#### **d. Institutional level: AIC Regional Coordination**

The AIC Executive Board applied this Systemic Change in its regional leadership activities. This example can be used by associations for national or regional management.

A few key points should be remembered:

- The nature of a system's components can be different (people, their environment but also money, power, languages, and geographic distances.)
- There is an interaction among these components, which is an asset rather than an obstacle.
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts i.e. this can be defined as “collective intelligence”
- How should the components of the system be studied? Components which “create the rules” should be retained; it is for instance worth including the “project” component in regional activities, since it can be their driving force. It is I effect a rule-inducing component, influencing the work and role of volunteers, their assessment, participation by beneficiaries and the multiplying effect.
- A small change of emphasis between 2 components can completely change the system.
- Each component acts with a positive intention.
- Each intervention has its function and raison d'être.
- People are not defined by their behaviour.
- The vision should be forward- and not backward-looking
- The question should be “How?” and not “Why?”

## **Practical exercise: which are the “regional AIC coordination” components?**

- The leader and her team
- National Associations
- The secretariat’s participation
- The assessors (DC or CM)
- The projects
- Twinnings
- Executive Board and Permanent Committee
- The context or AIC culture
- The different languages
- The money to run the projects and associations.

The “regional activities” system can be represented as a chart, which is a helpful thinking tool. Indeed, when the components are drawn, new links and relationships, which had been forgotten but which are important, appear on the chart and this can lead to new ideas. The solutions appear while drawing the chart... An example is given below: the boxes represent the systems and sub-systems while the arrows represent the interactions. .

It can be noticed that all those systems interact. To reach an objective certain links can be strengthened or new links can be created considering the systems in play.



# *Conclusion*

**We are all part of the system...**

Each of us is a system component. Indeed, you cannot avoid being part of the system, since even the “observer”, whether she wants it or not, influences the system being observed. Each of us consequently has **her share of responsibility in the system’s dynamics.**

Within AIC we have a common objective: we all want to fight poverty together. Let us take advantage of the numerous links existing between the various parts of our AIC system, let us develop our relations with the poor and our colleagues of different cultures and religions. Let us develop our cooperation with the branches of the Vincentian Family and let us make the most of the enhanced resources which result from such networking.

The Systemic Approach helps us to remain at a distance from events when faced with the problems of our complex world. Let us be creative and attempt different strategies **TOGETHER**, let us be confident and take advantage of experiences which have proven their worth.

The Systemic Change method is a very creative approach respecting both the human person and the environment: it emphasises how the system operates in order to become more open and create new links while abiding by the system’s self-regulation and particular life.

## AIC

### Association International of Charities

A mainly women's association organized  
at world level, including more  
than 250 000 volunteers  
in 6000 local teams in 50 countries.

Founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617  
to fight any forms of poverty and  
injustice and to give women an active  
social and recognized role  
in a spirit of solidarity.

Editor: Agnès Dandois

Tel.: 32 (0) 10 45 63 53

mail: [info@aic-international.org](mailto:info@aic-international.org)

[www.aic-international.org](http://www.aic-international.org)

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#### **Collaborators for this issue**

##### *Redaction*

Patricia de Nava

Béatrice Dupriez

##### *Design*

Béatrice Dupriez

##### *Translation*

Christiane

Krauss