



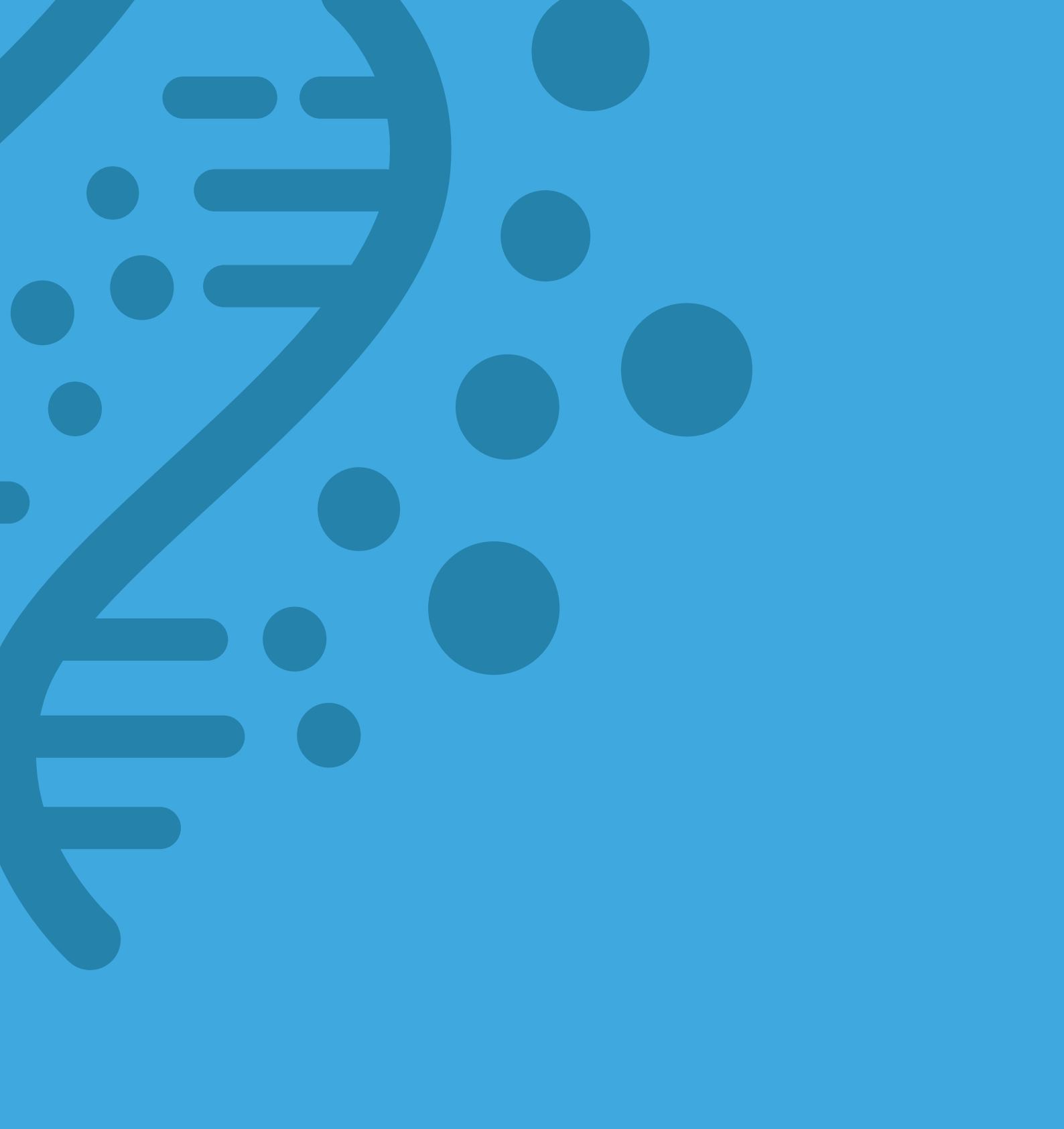
# All Systems Connect

How can systems leadership  
achieve justice for all?



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This background paper triggers thinking around the topic of systems leadership for the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023, World Forum, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2-4 May 2023. The paper was authored by IRC CEO, Patrick Moriarty on behalf of the symposium organisers.

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# All Systems Connect

## How can systems leadership achieve justice for all?

In May 2019 the All Systems Go! Symposium brought together a global community of 'systems thinkers' from water, sanitation and hygiene. Four years and a global pandemic later and we'll come together again for the [All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023](#), this time following hot on the heels of the first United Nations conference dedicated to water since Mar del Plata in 1977.

In those four years we've lived through a global permacrisis. A pandemic; an accelerating climate crisis; an energy and food crisis sparked by a full-scale war between two UN member states. The sustainable development goals that we set ourselves in 2015 seem as elusive as ever. Yet despite these crises, GDP growth continues (even if it is not shared equitably), as does access to basic services (even if not fast enough). Population growth is slowing, and an energy transition is underway and accelerating.

The next forty years - the next two generations of humanity - will, arguably, see us succeed or fail as a species. By the middle of this century, it should be clear whether we're going to make it through the current bottleneck of climate crisis, inequality, injustice and competition for scarce resources.

# The answer is in our hands

We're organising this symposium because we believe that whether we succeed or fail is in our hands, and that success relies on **all of us**. It relies on us driving the provision of the most fundamental public services to everyone: power, communications, healthcare, education, and, of course, water and sanitation. And it relies on us doing this in a way that is resilient and sustainable in the face of the climate crisis. It requires us to think differently, act differently, work differently; to connect systems and to drive change.

Why connect systems? Because the multi-dimensional challenges we face can't be solved by the fragmented and siloed thinking of the past. The carbon from my flight affects the onset of your rainy season. The runoff from your fertilizer and pesticide use pollutes the water needed for my drinking water service. All these systems are connected, across boundaries of community and nation.

**We need to accelerate our progress and to join the dots. The question is, how?**



# In water and sanitation - a growing body of experience

Much of the solution is already out there. Since All Systems Go! (2019), systems thinking has become mainstream within water, sanitation, and hygiene, and beyond. Despite the chaos of the intervening years, we continue to make progress – to test our ideas, learn what works, forge new alliances.

In water and sanitation, we've made real progress. We've learned, through doing, what it takes to deliver stronger and more connected systems at the local level. We're seeing a wave of professionalisation, delivered by public and private service providers. More and more countries are embracing the vision of sustainable and safely managed water and sanitation services **for everyone**. In 2023, access to a well or handpump, or an unimproved pit latrine is no longer enough as a driving vision. In a world of smart phones and cheap solar panels, standing in line for hours to pump untreated groundwater is not just incongruous, it is deeply unjust.

Importantly, we've reached out across institutional boundaries to create new movements involving people in all parts of the system, from young entrepreneurs to mayors and technical staff, and to national political leaders. In health, we've cut across sectoral barriers to turn water and sanitation in healthcare facilities into a movement that yields benefits to everyone; similarly, in schools, we put the spotlight on girls' access to water and sanitation and particularly menstrual health management; in sanitation, we've worked out business models for collecting and treating faecal sludge and selling the products into agricultural and energy markets; and in water, we've tested models for providing safe professional services in rural areas and informal settlements.

Equally importantly, we have developed tools to enable effective collective action: to plan for water and sanitation services at the scale of whole districts and cities, leaving no one behind. Working at a scale that empowers local leadership and makes it possible to close resource loops and address issues of justice, equity and the climate resilience.



# Systems leaders and the power of 'we'

These successes are all driven by local level leaders - [systems leaders](#) - a term that is growing in popularity. We believe that anyone reading this can become a systems leader, indeed it's likely you are one already!

Systems leaders embrace complexity, rather than looking for single or simple solutions. Systems leaders see and understand their place within 'the system', whether as a minister, an engineer, or a community mobiliser. They understand how the system works, and how they relate to and rely on other factors and actors. They know what lies within their sphere of control and what lies outside it - and they don't stop when they encounter a barrier. Instead, they call on colleagues and networks to work together and, when necessary, change the rules of the game.

Above all, they're able to understand other systems, their incentives and motivations and how to achieve multiple goals by aligning visions and actions. Systems leaders are generous, pragmatic and flexible. They understand that success means subsuming the ego of 'I' into the power of 'we', through collective action.

**You'll hear from and meet many of these changemaking systems leaders at All Systems Connect**

## Systems leadership – a summary definition

The term systems leadership describes the combination of skills, behaviours, and actions that drive collective action under complex circumstances. Systems leadership is about the ability to see the system, as well as the conviction, influence, and adaptive capacity to drive change in that system.

Systems leadership challenges are points in the system, or in the network of involved people, where systems leadership is required. Systems leadership actions call for new or different ways of working; these could be skills, approaches to convening and collaboration, structural changes in how the system is designed and operating, etc.

NOTE: this is a working definition of systems leadership - an emerging red thread in the All Systems Connect programme.



# Driving change at scale through systems leadership

Yet despite these examples of local success, we are failing at scale. We are off track to meet the global goals for water and sanitation but also for related public services. The world is getting richer, but poverty is stubbornly resistant.

The rich world is decarbonising, but slow and reluctant to support their poorer neighbours to do likewise, let alone compensate for the loss and damage they've already suffered.

Why is this? Primarily because, despite a growing army of examples of local systems leadership, the lessons learned are not being taken to scale. While local leaders cut across sectoral boundaries in cities and districts, this is harder to do for whole countries, let alone the world. For every district that has a locally-owned master plan for delivering resilient services to everyone who lives there - and the renewed self-confidence and sense of direction this brings - there are a hundred that do not. We're hampered by a lack of global and national level systems thinking and systems leadership.

To face the challenges of the next decades, we need systems thinking to go to scale: from individual service providers, districts and cities - to whole nations and global programmes. While there will always be sectors, we need to learn how to connect across them to create integrated and resilient solutions that last. This change has to be led.

Delivering true change and acceleration requires visionary leadership **at every level of the system**, including national. Success requires us to take what we've learned in the past years at the local level, delivering public services like water and

sanitation, and incorporate this into evidence-based and appropriately funded national systems delivering high quality and resilient services to all.

How to encourage, champion and support practical systems leadership is the red thread running through the whole symposium. Alongside the specific themes and objectives of individual streams and sessions, we will draw on the wisdom and experience of all those attending to better understand what systems leadership is and how to engender it. We'll answer questions like:

- What does it take to be a great systems leader?
- How can we make systems thinking and systems leadership both expected and rewarded?
- How can we identify, support and champion national systems leaders?
- How can we reward leadership that connects across systems boundaries?

Between May 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> in The Hague, we'll be inspiring and expanding our community of systems leaders, and constructing an agenda for developing and reinforcing our shared learning to drive the water action agenda needed to achieve the SDGs. We will be connecting people and ideas, systems, and solutions to achieve justice for all.

We're counting on the 500+ attendees - systems leaders from around the world - to help us to do this, in a spirit of openness and collaboration. We cannot wait to welcome you to be part of the action that leads to change.



**IRC** +  water for people + water for good. 

All Systems Connect 2023 is made possible thanks to the generous support of our partners including the World Health Organization and:

