

Rebuilding after COVID-19: A framework for long-term delivery

As we adapt to a new reality, our work is taking place across at least 3 time horizons: short-term [response](#), medium-term [resilience](#), and long-term **recovery**. Many public and social sector leaders are actively engaged on the first two – but the third is more elusive. When the immediate needs are so pressing, how do we dedicate time and space to thinking about anything else?

But in many ways, the long term is as urgent as the short term. If we don't plan for it now, the recovery will take us by surprise the same way the crisis did – and any opportunity that comes with it will pass us by. We know that our post-pandemic future will be a [contested](#) space in every sector. There's no guarantee that we will build back better – and indeed, forces are already amassing to ensure the opposite outcome by protecting their own interests over the public good. We need only consider recent events in the US – where it took thousands of Americans being arrested in protest so that four police officers could be brought to justice – to understand the challenge of systemic change.

How can leaders get ahead of this? We suggest appointing a team whose sole job is to worry about the long term. It need not be large, but it needs to have one luxury not afforded to anyone else: the ability to trust others to do the short- and medium-term work.

In 1940, less than a year after Britain found itself at war, when London was being bombed almost every night, when France had been over-run by the Nazis, and when Hitler was planning an invasion of Britain, a small number of senior officials from the Ministry of Education requisitioned a few rooms in a hotel out of London and set about their task – to design a school system for after the war. The war lasted another five years but the design they drew up provided the foundation for legislation in the last year of the war and the system after it.

What follows is a suggested framework that such a team could use to guide their thinking. It could be applied to a government, to a specific ministry/agency/sector, or alongside a whole community of stakeholders. The key is to anchor on one or more goals that you deeply and profoundly want to focus on – and to repeat this exercise for each one that is part of your agenda.

Step 1: The goal

Start by affirming (or reimagining) the goal you will focus on. What was a goal you had before the crisis – one that mattered then and still matters now? Think about your biggest ambitions – things like:

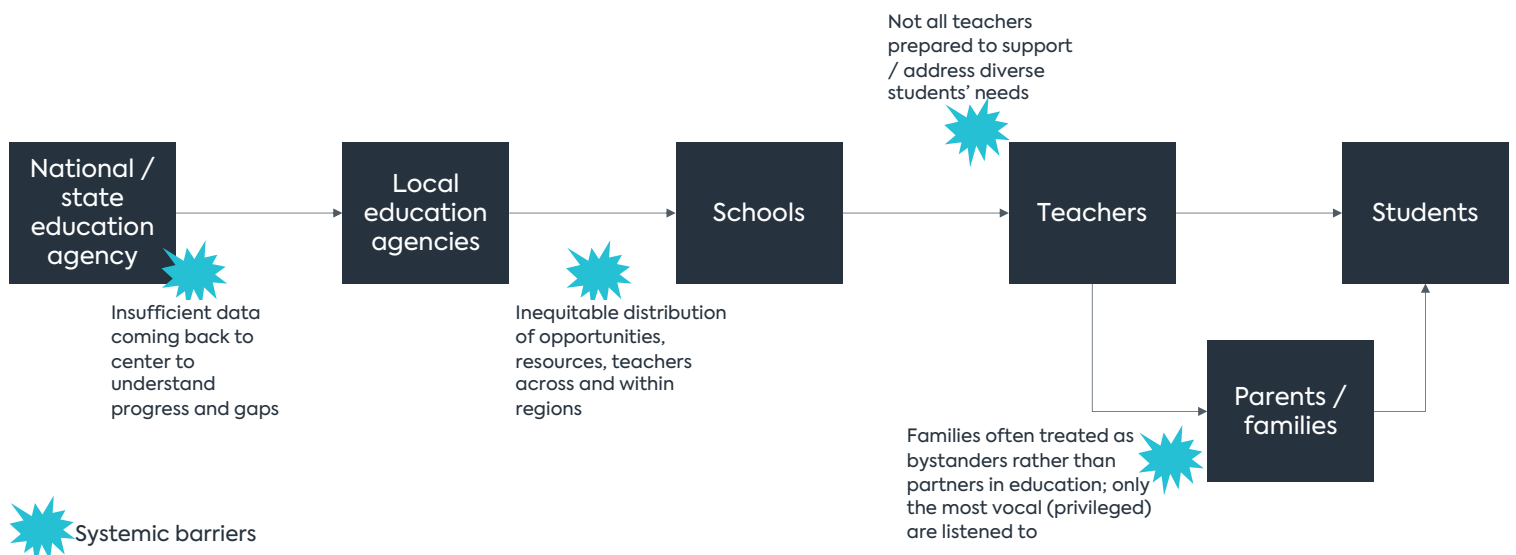
- Closing equity gaps in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education;
- Achieving the WHO's [Triple Billion goals](#) of universal health coverage, protection from health emergency, and improved health overall;
- Any of the UN [Sustainable Development Goals](#);
- Meeting or exceeding the [Paris Climate Agreement](#) targets; and/or
- Removing racism and bias from the systems set up to deliver these outcomes.

The crisis might have given you new goals as well – on health system performance, future crisis readiness, or economic mobility, for example. The point is to pick a goal so ambitious that you'd need to rethink the whole system to have a hope of achieving it.

Second, think about that system and its challenges. What, in the pre-pandemic world, were the deepest, most challenging structural barriers we faced to achieving the goal? Think of fundamentals: the way that systems are funded, structured, organized, and overseen – as well as the biases and prejudices that the people operating those systems may bring. How did these factors play out before the crisis hit?

Represent the old system with a **delivery chain** – a simple and straightforward accounting of the people, organizations, and systems responsible for delivering on the goal, and how they work (or don't work) together. Use the delivery chain to highlight the barriers you've identified.

Figure 1: Sample delivery chain in primary and secondary education



Step 2: Threats and opportunities

The pandemic is forcing all of us to take a defensive stance in the short term, as we respond to the threats created by an emergency - particularly the threats to communities who are vulnerable and disproportionately affected. At the same time, a crisis inevitably makes some things possible that were not possible before. For better or worse, this means that there are opportunities as well.

Figure 2 lays out a simple approach to identifying these threats and opportunities systematically, in the context of the goal and barriers you identified. It will ground your team's work in the work of your whole system - the adaptations you've already made and the systems you took off line to respond to the crisis - and build on those to look to the future. Consider these questions as a team; debate, discuss, and prioritize your answers.

Figure 2: Threats and opportunities

Our responses	Threats	Opportunities
<p>Adaptations we made: what did we start doing or doing differently?</p>	<p><i>Unintended consequences to manage:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the negative effects because of what we did? • What do we need to do to address them? 	<p><i>Innovations to make permanent:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the positive effects? Where might a playing field have been leveled or an inequity addressed because of what we did? • How can we make these changes stick?
<p>Systems we interrupted: What did we take offline?</p>	<p><i>Deepest harms to address:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who's most at risk because of what we did, and why? • What must we do to make them whole? 	<p><i>Ways to rebuild better:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which structural barriers to progress that we identified have been disrupted, changed, eliminated, or weakened as a result of what we did? • What would it take to rebuild without that baggage?

Step 3: The agenda

Once you've done this work, step back as a team and consider the following questions:

- **Strategy:** Based on your thinking, what are the top 2-3 **fundamental reforms** you'd want to prioritize as we rebuild? Which ones would maximize the likelihood of achieving your goal? Why and how would they do this?
- **Delivery:** If they were successful, what would the reimagined **delivery chain** look like? Draw an "after" picture to complement the "before" image you created in Step 1.
- **Measurement:** Keeping your original big goal in mind, what **leading indicators** would you want to track? Look at your delivery chain and find the areas where measurement and data will be most critical. What **data systems** would you want to put into place as you rebuild that will make this possible?
- **Stakeholders:**
 - Which **communities** should you work alongside to shape the goals, the agenda, and implementation? Who will be most affected, and who has the most at stake?
 - What kind of **guiding coalition** will you need to back these reforms? Who will need to be on your side?
 - Who will **stand against** this agenda? Who's going to fight hardest to rebuild the system in its original image, or worse?
- **Action plan:** What do you need to start doing to lay the groundwork for these reforms right now? Consider:
 - Reaching out to and building your guiding coalition, including those who will do the work alongside you;
 - Watching for opposition activity in the places you've identified as most likely;
 - Identifying upcoming milestones that will determine the fate of your agenda (e.g., elections, budget cycles, grants of recovery funds, key policies being proposed or reauthorized)
 - Accelerating learning from current innovations;
 - Gathering additional evidence to sharpen the work; and
 - Engaging the public with your thinking as it evolves (e.g., by publishing an open blueprint for the future).

Looking ahead

Follow these steps and you'll have something useful: a delivery plan that centers on a vision for the best possible world you can imagine after this pandemic - but also connects this vision to practical actions you can take today.

Over time, as crisis management improves and the crisis itself fades, this plan will grow in relevance (and detail). And a small investment of time, capacity and foresight today will prove decisive in helping you to achieve this vision in the future.