



**People-Centered
Institutions:**
IREX's Approach to
Advancing Institutional
Change



Just, prosperous, and inclusive societies are possible only when institutions are effective, accountable, and equitable.¹ Institutions permeate every aspect of our lives. They can either guarantee or deny access to quality education, jobs, safety, and security. They can either defend or violate a person's rights. Good governance, health outcomes, economic growth, poverty reduction, equal justice, quality education, and innovation are all less likely without healthy institutions.² Effective, accountable, and equitable institutions ensure that citizens can work together to solve the challenges they face, and that those in the community have equal rights, both on paper and in practice. They ensure that everyone has the opportunity to improve their lives and has access to justice when they are wronged.³

IREX supports institutions that serve the public good and contribute to social trust by facilitating effective and equitable outcomes consistently and with accountability. To do this, IREX supports people around the world – committed and inspired individual and organizational leaders – to bring about institutional change.

The word “institution” is often used to describe a civil society organization or a government body, but we adopt the definition used in social sciences, which views institutions more broadly. Institutions are the “**rules of the game**”⁴ based on a society's dominant values, norms, and mechanisms for enforcing them, and a shared understanding of how to generate, share, and exercise power. These rules of the game are set through **policies, laws, customs, and socially prescribed and accepted behaviors in a society**, and provide predictable structure and guidance for everyday life by using various incentives and disincentives to shape human interaction. They can be formal or informal, codified in laws, or based purely on tradition and habit. They reflect how a society chooses to organize itself and who benefits from its form of organization. Every society has its own webs of institutions, institutional arenas, and actors that can be complementary, competing, or overlapping.⁵

The Challenge

Around the world, **trust in institutions is declining**. In 2017, the Edelman Trust Barometer⁶ recorded a drop in trust across all four institutions of government, media, business, and NGOs for the first time since the barometer's launch in 2001. In almost two-thirds of the 28 countries surveyed, the general population did not trust those four institutions to “do what is right.” In 2021, the only institution that had recovered to become generally “trusted” was business. The root causes of decaying social trust are many. They include exclusionary or unfair norms and power imbalances that threaten or disadvantage some groups of people; mis-managed or inequitably allocated resources and services; a deficit of skilled and service-oriented leaders and other participants in public and civic institutions that result in performance

gaps; and an inability—or unwillingness—of civil society and media to effectively hold institutions accountable. An information and media environment, often rampant with mis- and disinformation and decreasing trust in the idea of facts, that highlights institutional failures can further exacerbate these root causes, even as it gives a voice to citizens' concerns and priorities.



Power and exclusion



Institutional change challenges the status quo, which often features rules that enable inequitable distributions of power, exclude groups from pathways to prosperity, and perpetuate control or privilege by some groups at the expense of others. Those who benefit from the status quo may not consider changes to be in their interest, and too often, resist change or pursue institutional changes that serve self-interest over the public good.⁷ Gains in personal influence and wealth undercut the effectiveness, accountability, and equity of institutions, reducing institutional trust, and preventing institutional changes, while exacerbating historic injustices. Corruption is one of the most visible and dispiriting symptoms⁸ of inequitable institutions that uphold unfair rules and perpetuate an uneven

distribution of power. Ethical and diverse leaders and their networks often must shift power to create equitable and inclusive institutions that innovate, invest, and deliver results for the entire society.⁹



Under-investment in people



People shape and lead institutions. Gaps in their skills present another practical challenge to advancing more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions. The people that make up or lead institutions must have the skills to effectively and inclusively plan, finance, govern, manage, and improve individual and institutional performance to serve the public needs they are meant to address. Requisite skills include setting standards and fostering organizational culture, transparently managing finances and resource allocation, monitoring performance and taking corrective action based on data, and inclusive change management to deliver effective services. Creating an enabling environment sensitive to organizational culture, power dynamics, policies, and incentives that reward

institutional performance is essential. Often it is poor governance and management skills that lead to a lack of legitimacy and trust in an institution. Leaders play an integral role in catalyzing—or stifling—high performance. Capable, ethical, and diverse leaders bring skills and perspectives that foster inclusion and equity and enable them to facilitate institutional change.



Unprecedented volumes of and access to information and disinformation



With an overflow of information, misinformation, disinformation, and the heightened influence of leaders' rhetoric, people find themselves overwhelmed or ill-informed or both. Despite massive volumes of information, in many cases citizens lack access to locally relevant information and analysis. When people lack the skills to make sense of information overflow or to discern accurate from false and manipulative information, or when they lack locally relevant information, they are unable to make well-informed decisions, act effectively to improve their lives, or hold those in power accountable. An unchecked rise of misinformation¹⁰ and disinformation is creating more doubt in the legitimacy of institutions. Subsequently, people may act, sometimes violently, to force

change. Furthermore, through social media, leaders now have an unfiltered megaphone through which to reach constituents on their personal devices. Leaders' words and actions have rarely been so influential. In some cases, their influence distorts perceptions of the legitimacy of institutions or solidifies the status quo in which power is unequally held.

Given the trends and challenges described above, the need for more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions is more urgent than ever. When trust wanes and grievances with institutions mount, social cohesion frays, and the result is apathy, political polarization, social protest, or violence.¹¹ IREX's people-centered approach takes on a new importance in these challenging times.

Our Approach

IREX's Vision

IREX and its partners strive for a world where:



Effective

Institutions perform and deliver services to the people they are designed to support, providing a safe and secure environment where people can work together peacefully, and communities achieve economic and social development.



Accountable

Institutions uphold principles of integrity and transparency while taking responsibility for the services they deliver. Citizens are better positioned to hold institutions accountable through access to pluralistic and free flowing high-quality news and information, and they can influence the leadership, budgets, or mandates of public-serving institutions.



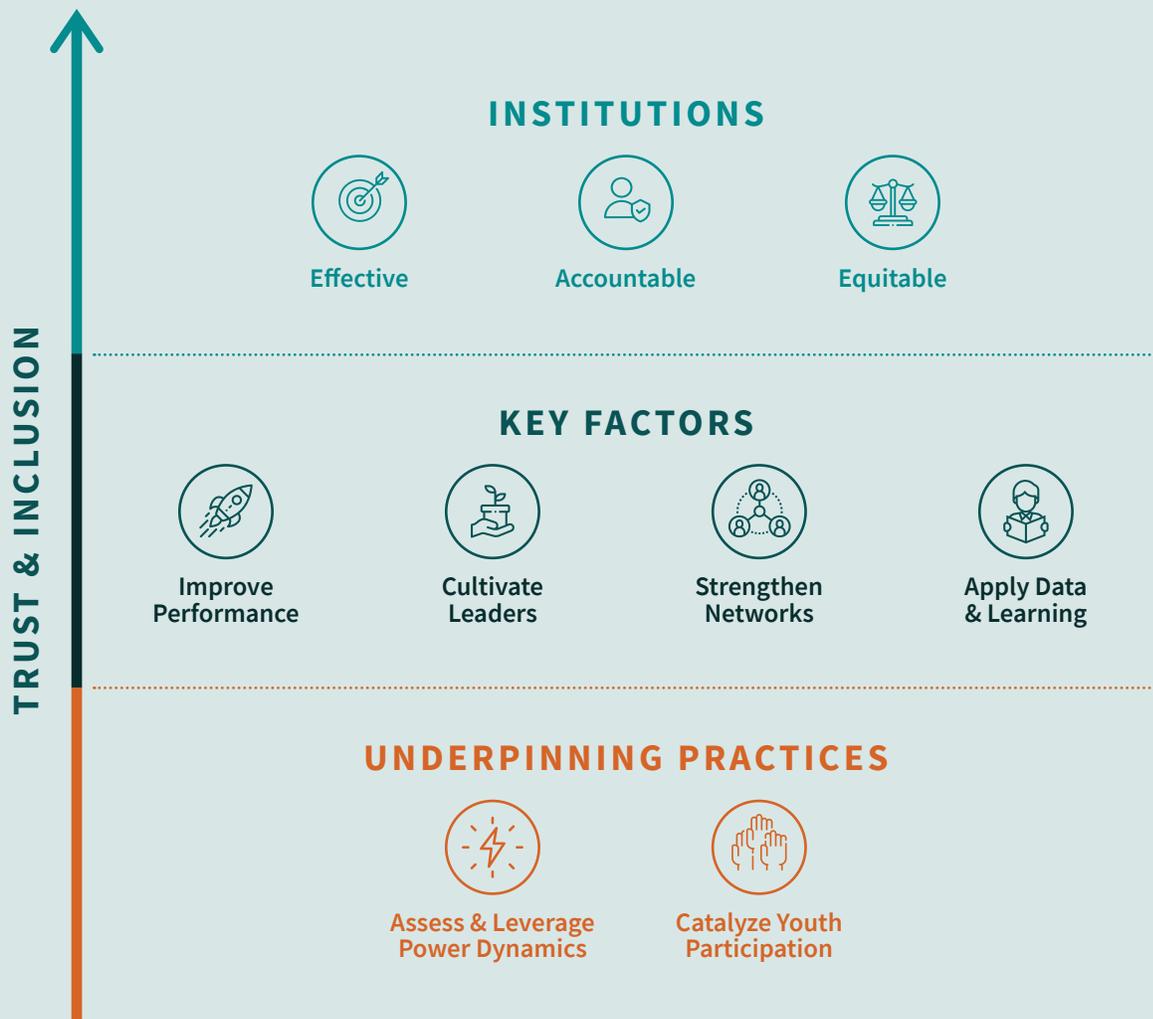
Equitable

Institutions provide everyone equal access to opportunities, public information, resources, and decision-making regardless of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, or religion. We intentionally use 'equitable' instead of 'inclusive' because we recognize that to address the historic, systemic discrimination that persists globally to this day, institutions must not just value diversity and inclusion, but seek to correct and address power differentials, exclusion, and discrimination.

How IREX Supports People-Centered Institutional Change

IREX advances more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions by partnering with people around the world who influence social change. We do not establish norms nor write public policies ourselves. Instead, we work adaptively with people and communities – committed and inspired individual and organizational leaders – who create change in support of more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions, and **ultimately help build trust in institutions**. We believe that the future hinges on people, their potential, and their humanity.¹²

Our approach to people-centered change in support of more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions is underpinned by two essential practices and tackles four key factors.



THE TWO UNDERPINNING PRACTICES



Assess and Leverage Power Dynamics

Institutional change begins with an understanding of the prevailing political and economic factors that affect the rules of the game—the social and cultural norms, resource allocations, and incentives within a given institution as well as within the implementing environment of our partners. IREX assesses the rules of the game, how they were established, and the losers and winners they create, paying special attention to the relationships and power dynamics among different institutions, groups, and individuals through a social equity and inclusion lens. This allows us to surface hidden opportunities to support diverse champions, defuse spoilers who do not support equity and inclusion, and engage stakeholders with the greatest potential

to advance changes for more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions and right the wrongs of historical injustices. We prioritize opportunities to affect institutional change where our analyses indicate there may be entry or leverage points – whether they are small windows of opportunity in closed and closing spaces or wide doors to walk through with a broad and inclusive coalition of local leaders in change-friendly enabling environments.



Catalyze Youth Participation

There are approximately 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 in the world today—the largest youth population ever, accounting for 16% of the total global population.¹³ While IREX prioritizes diversity and inclusion across all groups and identities, we pay special attention to this sizable youth population because just, prosperous, and inclusive societies need institutions that can effectively serve their youth, and because the institutional change necessary cannot succeed over the long run without including younger generations in the effort. As described in our approach to youth development, Catalyzing Youth Potential, IREX partners with youth to drive lasting social and economic change that benefits their communities, their families, and themselves.¹⁴ Unfortunately, youth are still infrequently in official positions of power, and their trust in formal institutions is declining.

IREX increases youth's abilities to better position them for work and participation in

society and facilitates opportunities to help youth apply and strengthen those abilities. We also support those in positions of power to become more responsive to youth needs, while empowering youth as forces for positive change. With these abilities, opportunities, and responsive institutions, youth can be protagonists who drive changes toward more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions.

We achieve transformative change across the following four factors when we start by assessing power dynamics and support youth throughout.

THE FOUR KEY FACTORS:



Improve Performance

Few things build trust in institutions more than their ability to perform.¹⁵ IREX supports partners in achieving the changes they intend to make toward more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions. IREX has honed a performance improvement process, described in our Guide to Performance Improvement,¹⁶ comprised of four key steps:

1. Define Desired Outcomes:

Determine the goal of the performance improvement process. What specifically do partners want to change about the formal or informal institution to make it more effective, accountable, and equitable?

2. Analyze and Assess Performance Gaps:

Collect local data and research to determine the gap between current and ideal states of performance. Interdisciplinary assessments capture a variety of perspectives from the partner and external stakeholders, who identify trends and needs to inform performance improvement plans.

3. Develop and Implement Performance Improvement Solutions:

Once the main barriers and enablers to achieve the desired outcome have been determined, we work alongside our

partners to design and prioritize potential performance solutions that are grounded in local data and research.

4. Continued Performance Evaluation:

IREX and its partners use structured systems to continuously evaluate progress with key performance indicators (KPIs). When designing performance solution feedback loops, we work with partners to create mechanisms to provide feedback safely and regularly, particularly in closed and closing spaces.

This performance improvement process works best when undertaken by an inclusive group of change-minded partners who work in alignment with broader levers of change. Champions within this group are also needed to drive and sustain the desired institutional change, which can take time and resources to achieve the desired results. Performance improvement partnerships are most successful when they are built on trust and mutuality, and when IREX assumes a facilitator (rather than ownership) role to ensure successful outcomes. In that spirit, both IREX and its partners continuously learn from each other, modifying the partnership and process as new learning emerges and as the implementing environment shifts.



Cultivate Leaders

Partnerships with forward-leaning, ethical, and inclusive leaders are at the core of our approach to building more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions. Leadership at every level of society is essential to this effort. In fact, effective leadership is one of the main factors in bringing positive change to organizations and institutions.¹⁷ Without people who are capable and willing to step up and act, changes that support more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions cannot occur.

IREX forges partnerships with leaders around the world at all levels of society who influence and advance the development of more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions.¹⁸ We partner with leaders who embrace a learning mindset, are steadfast in their pursuit of progress, and welcome change in themselves, others, and institutions to serve others. IREX invests in developing dynamic leaders who engage and inspire others, advocate thoughtfully, and continue to learn and adapt.

Current and future leaders must fully reflect their communities and promote and cultivate a diverse group of voices. Research shows that teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively.¹⁹ Yet, it remains difficult for marginalized groups, including women and youth, to access leadership opportunities and influence decisions, especially in environments where their needs and interests are diminished. In addition, opportunities for marginalized groups to lead are not easily obtained without circumventing the power structures in place. IREX partners with leaders who are committed to fostering inclusion and equity so that diverse voices are represented and heard in decision-making, and so that institutions become more inclusive and equitable at all levels of society.



and organizations up, down, and across²¹ inclusive social impact networks provide linkages, information exchange, learning, and other social capital²² benefits spurring inclusive solutions. Partners who can capitalize upon existing networks and create new ones gain access to relevant resources, opportunities, and services while drawing motivation and inspiration from connections to others. Cultivating connections to inclusive in-person and virtual networks is particularly critical for people and organizations to expand their impact, gain mentors and role models, and have access to opportunities to help them identify and pursue pathways to changes in support of more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions.

IREX supports institutional change partners to build or strengthen inclusive networks by promoting meaningful and multidimensional connections, creating purposeful and **trusted relationships** and groups, facilitating collaboration, and supporting growth through online and in-person engagement activities. We also help partners understand their networks better. Conducting network analyses with partners provides useful data on how to effectively leverage their networks for individual and collective goals. This data increases understanding of the number and strengths of connections related to a particular desired institutional change. We must think intentionally about the relationships that exist within a system to better understand it, including which people or relationships might be missing, or what needs to be strengthened to work with others toward institutional change.



Strengthen Networks

Taking a deliberate approach to network strengthening – the process of creating and improving connections and pathways between people and organizations to amplify and sustain momentum – allows champions of change for more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions to increase their impact. Networks are unparalleled support structures for these champions of institutional change.²⁰ Connecting people



Apply Information, Data and Learning

A focus on people and their ability to interact with information in productive ways that create change is core to IREX's Approach to Vibrant Information.²³ Institutional change partners need to generate, access, engage with, and disseminate high-quality information and data to make informed and impactful decisions, hold those in power accountable, and take actions that will create more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions. They also need to use information and data to engage in continuous applied learning that enables constant adaptation, improved performance, and better results.

Beyond just collecting, cleaning, or visualizing data, IREX has proven methods that help partners interpret information and data responsibly and accurately; combine evidence with experience to navigate political economies; think critically about biases in information, data collection, or analysis; identify and be resilient to disinformation; respond to unanticipated consequences of evidence-informed decisions; and communicate data-informed decisions effectively and empathetically.

We also incorporate—and work with partners to incorporate—**continuous and mutual applied learning** and developmental evaluation into our work to adapt and surface best fit approaches that maximize impact. To do this we:

- ✓ Create space for diverse participation at all levels to provide constructive feedback and fresh ideas.
- ✓ Facilitate in-depth reflections to surface insights that help us understand what is and is not working.
- ✓ Leverage peer learning by conducting assessments and other activities as a cohort to promote shared exploration of challenges and strengths.
- ✓ Couple highly participatory and in-depth qualitative data collection with the quantification and summary of results in visual data dashboards, which help us and our partners to absorb complex information without losing the richness of the approach.

Transforming information, data, and learning into practice in these ways increases the impact of our partners' efforts to create changes in support of more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions.

Our Principles



People are and should be the primary agents of their own development. IREX adheres to the following principles centered around building trust and prioritizing local context and dynamics.

- ✓ **Elevating local expertise:**
Local actors have direct experience in addressing the challenges and attempting solutions for their institutional change. We co-create and co-implement local actors' vision for change.
- ✓ **Applying systems thinking:**
Our work is grounded in a holistic understanding of the local system(s) – the resources, roles, relationships, rules, and results – that are working for and against institutional change in each context. This enables us to identify leverage points essential for scaling impact and ensures we do no more harm.²⁴
- ✓ **Embracing mutual learning:**
We learn from our partners' expertise while contributing our own comparative experience and learning from around the world to adapt and surface best fit approaches so that they are technically optimal and politically feasible. Achieving institutional change requires continuous testing, evaluation, learning, and adaptation.
- ✓ **Sustaining engagement:**
Because change takes time, and sustained effort is more likely to produce the intended results, we invest in and connect with local expertise and existing institutions. From the onset, we orient our approach to putting local actors and institutions in the lead as soon as possible so that they can continue the work on their own well after we are gone.
- ✓ **Prioritizing inclusion:**
We meet people – all people – where they are and support an environment for everyone to be their authentic selves. By encouraging and taking the time to understand varying perspectives, expertise, interests, priorities, assets, and needs, we leverage diversity to realize a shared vision of change that works for everyone.



Why IREX?

For over 50 years, IREX has invested in people in support of institutional change across sectors. Today we work in over 100 countries on six continents, facilitating mentorships and internships, providing technical assistance and training, arranging exchanges to support peer learning, and awarding grants to support our partners as they navigate in politically charged institutional arenas and take the actions necessary to create more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions. We know how to foster partnerships with key actors already committed to working for social change, and accompany them to build, apply, and spread knowledge, skills, and attitudes throughout their networks, so that those actors influence institutions, breaking through the gridlock of vested interests that have maintained the status quo.

Our past and current work demonstrates our extensive experience supporting people-centered institutional change toward more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions for more just, prosperous, and inclusive societies.

With IREX's support, 11 government entities in Jordan conducted a participatory gender audit of their institutional policies and practices. These audits have catalyzed a process of incremental but steady institutional change toward a more **equitable** public sector. For example, new mandatory training is now offered to 3,000 – 5,000 public school teachers annually to promote gender equity in classrooms.



IREX provided fellowships to university change-makers across Eurasia and Africa to strengthen research management and knowledge transfer so that educational institutions became more **effective**. More than 84% of these fellows have implemented reform projects at their home universities and 72% have driven sustainable institutional change because of their participation.



IREX fellowships across Africa empowered 91% of participants to be more **effective** leaders in their governments, organizations, or business roles, with two-thirds of fellows directly applying skills to manage businesses, organizations, or teams. Fellowships enabled 79% of participants to develop productive and sustainable relationships on the personal and institutional level.



With IREX's support, 185 young journalists in Sri Lanka improved cross-cultural understanding and became more committed to facilitating dialogue on national issues. They also improved their ability to foster diversity and to produce gender and conflict sensitive reporting in support of more **equitable and accountable** institutions.





87% of IREX's local government partners in Moldova improved their performance, becoming more **effective and accountable** across six critical areas. 50% percent of our local government partners organized public hearings to increase budgeting transparency for the first time, and they generated a total of \$2.5 million USD in revenues from asset management - a three-fold increase over revenue prior to IREX support.



Through a Foundational Political Leadership training course, IREX reached 1,383 young people from 68 of Guatemala's municipalities. 98% of participants went on to apply their new knowledge to address tangible issues in their communities and over 75% supported enhanced democratic principles that advance **accountable** institutions.



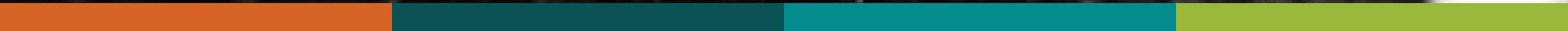
Together, IREX and local partners in Tanzania built data confidence and skills of sub national leaders to inform decisions so that community level institutions became more **accountable and equitable**. As a result of the program, 56% of the leaders used data to inform their decisions with greater frequency, and 65% began to share data in their organization with greater frequency.



To learn more about IREX's work and how you can partner with us to support more effective, accountable, and equitable institutions around the world, please reach out to us at communications@irex.org.

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