ISS supports public servants, citizens, and scholars who lead change under difficult conditions. We provide insights from practical experience, as well as a university platform for research and the exchange of ideas.
What We Do

Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS) chronicles frontline experiences of institutional reform. Our research explores the practical and political economy challenges faced by people who want to build more effective and accountable government and the strategies used to deliver meaningful change. ISS focuses on policy implementation and helps to build a science of delivery.

Founded in 2008 and based at Princeton University, ISS has created a global public good currently used by leaders, their advisers, researchers, and students in 172 countries. ISS has conducted over 2,500 interviews in almost 70 countries and produced more than 160 case studies that illuminate reform strategies in a range of sectors.

ISS case studies help reform leaders share experiences and teach aspiring change-makers. They also create a knowledge base for generating analysis and broader insight.

All ISS case studies and many of our interviews appear on the program’s website. They are free to download for non-commercial use.

Photos, from top: Cairo, Egypt, Laura Bacon; Kono District, Sierra Leone, Meghan McNulty; Jaisalmer, India, Dora Huang. Courtesy of the Office of International Programs, Princeton University.
The ISS Difference

We put national reformers front and center. Getting the incentives right is a central challenge in building core government institutions but incentives alone are not sufficient. The really hard work lies in figuring out how to deploy resources, including staff, and how to deliver improved services. Implementation requires political skill as well as technical know-how and management sense. By drawing on practitioners’ unique stories, ISS highlights the role of the local leader.

Analysis and information are our strengths. We offer a resource open to all – an idea bank. Our website contains more than 160 case studies, as well as interviews and analysis from countries in Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East. They provide practitioners and researchers with reflections to inform their work.

We place a premium on operational detail. To understand the process of institutional change, ISS case studies allow close-up examination of what actually happened. Our case studies track the specific sequence of steps public servants take to build stronger performance.

We ask how and why. One design, one strategy, one innovation does not fit all situations. Contexts, histories, and the distinctive aptitudes of individuals all shape what is possible. Our analytic briefs illuminate the ways in which key features of context shape reform leaders’ range of options and actions.

Our university base makes independent and creative reflection possible. When a problem arises that reform leaders in many places find especially difficult, ISS is able to harness an array of talents from within Princeton University and from outside organizations to suggest solutions.
Focus Areas

**Accountable Policing:** community policing, external and internal accountability, inclusiveness, and the integration of non-state security actors.

**Anti-Corruption:** independence, legal structure, compliance with international law, monitoring, investigation or referral, enforcement, prevention, and inter-agency cooperation.

**Centers of Government:** strategic planning, preparation of policy papers and choices, coordination, follow-up and monitoring, political liaison, donor coordination, and cabinet efficiency.

**Civil Military Relations:** restoring civilian authority over armed forces, building a defense ministry, developing civilian defense experts, reducing numbers of officers and enlisted fighters.

**Civil Service:** rapid results, performance management streamlining, coordination, e-governance, short-route accountability, community-driven development, and new public management reforms.

**Natural Resources:** balancing conservation and economic development, using payments for environmental services, increasing transparency in resource management.

**Elections:** violence reduction, training of electoral workers, vulnerability mapping, voter registration, electoral dispute resolution, peace councils, polling locations, legal frameworks, and election security.

**City Management:** covering topics such as citizen support cultivation, accessible services, anti-corruption efforts, and revenue generation.
ISS Products & Resources

The program’s case studies offer detailed accounts of public sector reform. The cases draw on in-depth field interviews with the leaders who build institutions. They chronicle challenges, strategies, implementation steps, obstacles, results, and reflections.

Interviews encourage reformers to reflect on their experiences highlight contributions by people whose work usually goes unrecognized and enable leaders at all levels of government to learn from each other.

Cross-cutting analytic briefs highlight the pros and cons of specific tactics and strategies in different contexts. The research papers and practitioner-friendly policy briefs in this series appear several months after the conclusion of each related set of case studies.

ISS’s convening power is based on a network of almost 5,000 reformers, policy practitioners, and academics who can be mobilized for dialogue on governance themes.

successfulsocieties.princeton.edu

Most of ISS’s work is posted on a publicly accessible website designed to serve users in countries with low Internet bandwidth. All published case studies and cross-cutting strategy notes are available free in this repository, along with more than 370 interviews and related datasets.
The Idea Bank

• Luciano Evaristo, Director of the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, explains how his organization monitors both legal and illegal deforestation in the Amazon rain forest. Brazil’s decade-long effort to target the areas that bore the greatest responsibility for forest loss reduced the deforestation rate in the Amazon region by nearly 75%.

• One day in 2008, Zubair Bhatti, a district officer in Pakistan’s Punjab province, decided to confront the issue bribery and corruption among staff in his property registration office. He began contacting citizens by phone to inquire about their registration experiences. An ISS case study describes how his phone calls became the basis for the Citizen Feedback Monitoring Program. By early 2014 the program spanned all 36 districts in Punjab and collected citizen feedback on 16 different public services through 12,000 daily text messages.

• Post-election transitions are often difficult. Before Ghana’s 2008 presidential election, the Institute of Economic Affairs sponsored a dialogue between the major parties, while President John Kufuor’s administration worked separately on a plan to improve cabinet handover procedures. Their efforts eased Ghana’s political tensions and allowed incoming President John Atta Mills to focus on policy priorities and ensure continuation of effective projects and programs.

• Rule of law and good governance require a sound judiciary. When Willy Mutunga became Kenya’s chief justice in 2011 he launched a process of transformation to reduce judicial corruption and cut the courts’ backlog of almost 1 million cases. His reforms opened up lines of communication for citizens to register complaints, suggest changes, and monitor judicial performance.
Scholarship

ISS supports scholarship on questions related to institution building and institutional change, as well as some of the normative issues that often arise from these processes. It produces datasets or other research products to support development of general insights. It sponsors a workshop series that brings graduate students and faculty members together to investigate program themes, and it hosts occasional Ph.D. affiliates from Princeton University.

Teaching Materials

Teaching programs around the globe use ISS case studies. The cases may be used free of charge for non-commercial purposes, subject to the Terms of Use on the final page of each case. Teaching notes are available for selected cases.

Testimonials

“ISS’s work is crucial to enrich policymakers’ understanding of policymaking environments and equip them with the tools to address the too frequent disconnect between technical and socio-cultural change.”

“ISS case studies offer a clear and fresh departure from short-sighted frameworks. It elevates the discussion about what works - and what doesn’t work - in development, taking into account capabilities of domestic actors, pace of economic development, absorption capacity and, of course, historical context. It’s a pleasure - and great learning experience - to read these materials.”

“I just wanted to drop you a note to say congratulations on your final reports. … They are both really well done and very informative even for me as a Jordanian. I have been distributing them left, right and center.”
ISS is jointly supported by Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, the Mamdouha S. Bobst Center for Peace and Justice, and a number of other institutions.

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