INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

Building Institutions, Escaping Development Traps

Interview Brochure

A joint program of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and Bobst Center for Peace and Justice at Princeton University

www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties
Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS)

What is the ISS program about?
Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS) is a resource that supports the efforts of reform leaders, policy makers and scholars to build stronger, more accountable institutions. ISS focuses on governance reforms in challenging contexts, profiling key reformers and the strategies they employ to escape governance traps.

Our oral history interviews provide a way for public servants in different countries to learn from each other. The interviews become the basis for a variety of written case studies, which help chronicle the experiences of practitioners who have on-the-ground experience in institution building. The interviews and case studies are posted to a public website to support training and reflection among our audience.

Who we are
• ISS is a Princeton University research program that supports public servants who lead change under difficult conditions.
• Our researchers travel the globe to interview people who have tried to build institutions in challenging settings.
• We produce field-based case studies, oral histories and cross-cutting analyses that deepen insight about how to build accountable institutions and escape the development traps that often sabotage reform.
• Our work documents real-life reformers and “pockets of excellence,” creating a free and ever-growing online archive of examples and best practices for practitioners and scholars.

Which subject areas does ISS address?
Our focus areas include:

• Civil service
  o Topics include staff recruitment and training, computerization of records, corruption, downsizing, extending services to insecure areas, managing diversity, one-stop shops and performance management systems.

• Elections
  o Topics include voter education and registration, boundary delimitation, poll location, election security, recruitment and training of electoral workers, electoral dispute resolution and peace councils.

• Policing
  o Topics include community policing, corruption, external and internal accountability, non-state security actors, recruitment, training, integration and amalgamation of different police units.

• City management
  o Topics include building citizen support, making services accessible, managing informal settlements, overcoming corruption, revenue generation, e-governance, and organizing a municipal center of government.

• Decentralization
  o Topics include monitoring performance, extending services to remote areas, discouraging fragmentation, sequencing reform, and engaging traditional authorities.

In addition to these themes, ISS works on strategies for escaping a variety of “development traps.” These traps often bring promising governance turnarounds to a halt in countries dealing with complicated political, economic and social problems.
How does ISS achieve its goals?
ISS has a team of researchers who travel the globe to interview people who have undertaken challenging and innovative reforms. We profile the work of people who have attacked difficult problems and document the steps they took to overcome obstacles.

To date, ISS staff members have conducted over 1,200 interviews with reform leaders in over 40 countries around the world.

Where do we work?
The countries where ISS works include:

- Albania
- Bangladesh
- Bhutan
- Bolivia
- Bosnia
- Botswana
- Brazil
- Burundi
- Cambodia
- Colombia
- Costa Rica
- Cote d’Ivoire
- Egypt
- El Salvador
- Georgia
- Ghana
- Haiti
- India
- Indonesia
- Jordan
- Kosovo
- Lesotho
- Liberia
- Macedonia
- Malaysia
- Mongolia
- Mozambique
- Nepal
- Nicaragua
- Nigeria
- Northern Ireland
- Papua New Guinea
- Philippines
- Rwanda
- Sierra Leone
- Solomon Islands
- Somaliland
- South Africa
- Tanzania
- Timor-Leste
- Uganda
- Vietnam

What services does ISS provide, and how will your interview help?

Interviews. Each ISS project begins with interviews of reform teams in a variety of countries. These interviews engage leaders in focused conversations about particular challenges. When possible, we tape these conversations. With permission, we may post the conversation to allow reformers to learn from each other directly, in their own words. Participants become part of a knowledge network. The interviews become part of an oral history archive.

Case studies. The interviews ISS conducts become the basis for case studies. These trace the steps reformers have taken to try to improve a service, build an institution or escape a governance trap. They provide quick and engaging overviews of selected experiences around the globe. The cases are an important part of the ISS idea bank. They help users evaluate pros and cons of different strategies and weigh the effects of context.

Above: Rwandan officials discuss governance principles and priorities at a village gathering in Nyabihu district.

Left: View of Cairo, Egypt
Interview Process

Whom do we interview?
- If one of our researchers contacts you, it is because you have played an important role in improving an institution or service. Your counterparts in other countries value your reflections as they plan their own projects.
- ISS contributors include presidents and ministers, as well as elected officials, city managers, field staff and NGO leaders.
- Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may decline to answer questions an interviewer poses.

What can I expect when I meet an interviewer?
- If you agree to an interview, it will be arranged for a time and at a location that is convenient for you.
- Quiet places such as offices or conference rooms are preferable.
- Our interviews vary in length from 30-90 minutes. We want to give every interviewee the opportunity to explain their work in depth and with important details.

Why would I want to participate in an interview?
- You will be able to share some of your thoughts about how to improve organizational effectiveness. These reflections will reach a wide audience of practitioners, academics and policymakers.
- Your reflections will help build a rich, detailed and balanced case study of the experiences of your country.
- The interview will give you an opportunity to reflect on some of the work you have led.
- Your interview – with your approval – may also be posted to our website: [www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties)

What can I expect during the interview?
- The interviewer will open with a few brief questions about your background and career history before asking about the project you have led.
- At any point you may decline to answer questions. If the interview is taped, you may also request that the recorder be switched off in order to ask for clarification or to discuss how best to proceed.
- Your experiences are the focus of the interview, and we are interested in detailed observations. For example, if you have worked on a reform project, we would like to know what options you considered, the steps you took to implement changes, the challenges you faced along the way, how you overcame these and what the results have been.
- Although we do not provide specific questions beforehand, our interviewers are happy to tell you the particular areas of your experience that they would like to learn more about.
What happens after the interview, if it is recorded?

• Processing usually takes 2-3 months.
• If ISS writers would like to use a quote from the interview, you will receive a request for permission by email or by another means you indicate.
• If you allowed the program to record your interview and the program asks to use the transcript, you may indicate the level of review you prefer — for example, no use of the transcript without clearance, or no clearance required. If you tell us that we should clear the transcript with you, you will receive a copy and a request to use the transcript.
• When the case study is complete, you will find it at www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties

Our research process

• Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may decline to answer questions or ask to talk about another topic at any time.
• Those who participate have the option to skip questions, review quotes, and embargo parts of their interviews for release at a future date unless they specifically waive this option.
• All research conducted by the program adheres to the policies of Princeton University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

What makes ISS distinctive?

The reform leader is the starting point. A lot of people say that the main challenge in building core government institutions is to get the incentives right. People who are motivated will find a way to make core institutions work. We say incentives are just one piece of the story. The really hard work lies in figuring out how to deploy resources, including staff, to deliver improved services. Implementation requires political skill as well as technical know-how and management sense.

Operational detail is key. A reform leader who has just taken on a new job has little time to determine how to translate broad principles into action. ISS tries to share stories about the sequence of practical steps leaders have taken to build institutions or solve strategic problems.

Context is important. One design, one strategy, one innovation does not fit all. Contexts, histories, and the distinctive aptitudes of individuals all shape what is possible. Our analytical briefs examine how key features of context shape a reform leader’s range of options.

Information and analysis are our strengths. ISS does not provide tailor-made advice or technical assistance. There are people and programs much better positioned than ours to provide carefully honed recommendations to individual leaders. We provide an information resource open to all—an idea bank.

Our university base makes independent and creative reflection possible. When there is a problem that reform leaders in many places find especially difficult, we use our university base to harness an array of talents and help come up with proposed solutions.
What does the ISS website offer?

- Oral history transcripts and audio recordings based on interviews from around the world
- Policy notes and case studies, based on our interviews and other research
- Descriptions of focus areas, including critical tasks and other resources associated with these areas
- Descriptions of development traps, with links to related oral histories and policy notes

Who uses our website and the information we collect?

Our website helps disseminate the variety of products that ISS research generates. Here are a few examples of how our research might be used:

- A public servant in Afghanistan or Tanzania may use the site to identify what other countries are doing to manage delivery of the public service payroll to remote areas, or how to engage civic groups in monitoring use of a natural resource.
- A police officer posted to Timor-Leste or Haiti can quickly find out how counterparts in other parts of the world have tried to solve a problem.
- A scholar from the U.S. can collaborate with a counterpart in Ghana or El Salvador to test an idea offered by someone in Ethiopia or Bosnia using our sponsorship and the help of a working group ISS supports.
What are people saying about ISS?

Readers have commended ISS’s ability to present complicated reforms in a clear but sophisticated format, shining a spotlight on important untold stories.

“I just wanted to drop you a note to say congratulations on your final reports. … They are both really well done and very informative. … I have been distributing them left, right and center.”
- public sector reformer

“Thank you very much and congratulations! You were capable of telling such a complex story, full of nuances within a relatively reduced space and entirely trustful!”
- public sector reformer

“Many thanks for sharing these cases, … which are excellent examples of how talented leadership and perseverance can result in some truly impressive improvements in service delivery that are entirely home grown.”
- representative of an international organization

“Reading that text has been a wonderful gift. The interview took place just a couple of weeks after the provincial election was completed. We were so tired and happy and there was a real sense of a job well done. I didn’t write a diary and it is something I really regret, but that interview just brings back the memories so vividly of what was an extraordinary time and an extraordinary experience. I will treasure that manuscript. This is a wonderful program you have, to capture thoughts in time and give them back to people.”
- public sector reformer

“It was my pleasure to take part in your research. It was interesting to remember and appreciate all the work our team had done a decade ago. We never had the time to reflect or even comprehend the significance of our actions when we were in the midst of our reform efforts. …We feel that we have not only created real change on the ground but also contributed to a new way of thinking in the public sector. It is nice to know that what we did then continues to inform research now.”
- public sector reformer

Want to know more?

Email iss@princeton.edu to join our distribution list or send questions or comments about our program.
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Bobst Hall houses the ISS offices
on Princeton University’s campus

Photo credits: D. Scher, L. Bacon, R. Majeed, M. Scharff (ISS staff)
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