



# HOW-TO DRAFT: SYSTEMS THINKING FOR CAMPAIGNING & ORGANIZING

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## Disclaimer / Request for your help

This doc is a work in progress that is meant to evolve over time with input from campaigners and organizers. At the moment, the tips and ideas here reflect the voices of the [contributors/reviewers listed below](#). We are always looking to add more voices of folks that have knowledge and experience on this topic. If this is you, please contact us here: [blueprintsfc@gmail.com](mailto:blueprintsfc@gmail.com).

## Summary

Systems thinking provides campaigners and organisers with an overall approach and a set of tools to understand the entrenched problems we work on and more strategically engage with the complex systems that we operate in.

In this guide we look at systems practice as an overarching approach that can help our campaigns and organising strategies be more effective at driving systems change. This approach is grounded in some key principles including focusing on relationships and patterns, working to unlock the forces of change, putting pressure on “leverage points”, planning to adapt and engaging multiple perspectives. We also go through a broad, flexible process that can be used to focus campaigning and organising strategies on driving systemic change. This is achieved by developing an understanding of the system you want to shift, identifying levers of change in that system and developing an adaptive strategy to put pressure on these levers to achieve your goals. We hope this guide will help you set up an approach for your campaigning and organising work that can analyze the different systems in play, not just the concrete issue your campaign or organisation seeks to address.

This guide is accompanied by a sister guide on [Systems Mapping for Campaign Design](#) which explores how to apply some specific systems thinking tools for developing campaigns.



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## What is systems thinking?

Systems thinking is a broad term that encompasses three distinct meanings. Firstly, often taken together with complexity theory, it can be thought of as a [theoretical / conceptual framework](#) for understanding the key characteristics and behaviours of systems (be they social, economic, political, environmental, etc.), and how change happens in such systems. This framework draws on some core concepts including feedback, emergence, self-organisation, nonlinearity and leverage points.

Secondly, systems thinking can be thought of as an **overarching approach, or [mindset](#), for managing change processes**, with a particular focus on achieving systemic (or systems) change in complex environments. This definition is often referred to as a ***systems approach*** or ***systems practice***, and is the focus of this guide.

Finally, systems thinking can also be understood as a [set of concrete tools and methodologies](#) for analysing systems and driving systemic change. Some of these tools and frameworks are covered in this guide, however we provide a more in-depth explanation on how to apply some specific system mapping tools for campaign design in [this sister guide that we created to accompany this one](#).

## Who's doing it?

Organisations such as [MobLab](#), [NEON](#), [SmartCSOs](#), [Greenpeace](#) and the [Ayni Institute](#) have been working to develop campaigning and organising frameworks and methodologies that integrate systems-thinking tools and approaches.

In addition to the organisations mentioned above, others have also applied a variety of different systems tools and methodologies to their campaigning and organising strategies, including [Re-Amp](#), [Amnesty International](#), [The One Campaign](#) and [Serjus](#). We explore these examples in greater depth in our [Systems Mapping for Campaign Design guide](#).

Additionally, movements such as [Extinction Rebellion](#) and [Gasfield Free Northern Rivers Alliance](#) have applied complexity concepts to their organising strategies.



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## When to do this

Systems approaches to campaigning and organizing are most appropriate **when you are working on complex, or so-called “wicked”, problems**. These are big, structural issues that exhibit characteristics like:

- They are composed of many interconnected and interdependent elements so that a change to one part of the problem can lead to unpredictable ripple effects which end up affecting other parts.
- Similarly, they cannot be disentangled from their context - they are strongly linked to other problems (e.g. health issues also being linked to environmental issues).
- They operate in dynamic, uncertain environments, which means they won't “sit still.”
- They have proven themselves to be resistant to the efforts of past strategies that have sought to change them. Or prior strategies have led to changes in the short-term, only for them to be undone in the longer-term by countervailing forces.
- They are embedded in a complex set of power relations and vested interests that will be difficult to undo.
- There is a range of people involved in different aspects of the problems, with differing values, experiences and worldviews. This means that there is always more than one explanation for a wicked problem because the explanations vary greatly between different people who perceive or experience the problem in different ways.
- The above also means that there will be no universally agreed-upon “solution”, or set of solutions, to the problem. Consequently, there will be no universal template to follow when tackling a wicked problem.

If any of these characteristics sound familiar to you, it's because so many of the issues that campaigners and organisers work on, from the climate crisis, to healthcare, corruption, economic justice, oppression and many others, can be considered to be wicked problems. Whilst systems approaches certainly shouldn't be thought of as silver



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bullets for tackling these issues, they do offer an approach that can help to overcome many of the limitations that conventional strategies, based on linear, incremental models of change, face when tackling such complex issues.

When thinking about when to apply a systems approach, it's important to stress that systems analysis is time consuming, ranging from a couple of weeks to many months. But fortunately, you don't have to redo it at every moment. Ideally your campaign strategy is grounded in your systems analysis, which provides broad strategic orientation. However, you should also regularly revisit based on real-world results to integrate new knowledge into your strategy and tactics. For example, Greenpeace's existing systems analysis for their eco-agriculture campaign allowed them to [react quickly and strategically in response to Typhoon Hagupit](#) and make big gains for their campaign.

[MobLab's Campaign Canvas](#) is a useful tool to help think about what to revisit, and when, and how shifts there might affect other elements of your campaign.

## Impact / Why do this?

Applying systems thinking can help campaigners and organisers to...

### **Focus campaigns on achieving deeper, systemic change**

As campaigners, our task is easiest when we can break things down into an easy critical pathway. "We'll do A, then B, then C, which will make D happen, and in turn we'll do E, which will result in victory, F." Unfortunately, if we look at any wicked problem we seek to shift, it becomes immediately clear that such an approach does not result in lasting change -- at most we wind up with short-term victories that generate attention but are not sustainable in the long-run.

A focus on systems change offers a different -- harder, but also more rewarding -- path. By focusing on the components and relationships that make up the status quo, and focusing on how these can be shifted to a new and different status quo, we open the possibility for durable shifts that sustain and reinforce themselves.



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## **Make sense of, and more effectively engage with, the complex problems we work on as campaigners and organisers**

Systems thinking provides us with specific tools that can help us to make sense of the elaborate set of relationships and dynamics that sustain complex problems. It is also an overarching approach that we can use to more effectively engage with wicked problems through our campaigning and organising work. This approach starts with the acknowledgement that, when we find ourselves working in an environment where we cannot plot out A-->B-->C-->D-->E-->F, no matter how much research and planning we do in advance, then we know that we're operating in a [complex system](#). This insight provides us with two additional pieces of information:

1. The approach we must take is one of iterative cycles of “probe-sense-respond”: where we *probe* the system with different tactics, *sense* and learn from how the system reacts to these tactics and then *respond* by adapting our strategy. We need to have an *emergent practice* and learn how the system functions as we go, rather than presuming we can know everything in advance.
2. This means we have to be comfortable operating in uncertainty. If we cannot know everything in advance, we have to make decisions and choose courses of action without knowing for sure what will work. A probe-sense-respond approach can ensure no huge risks are taken without being tested. Operating in uncertainty becomes an accepted norm, rather than a feared exception. Much more on this in explainers of the [Cynefin Framework](#).

This was a key lesson learned by Amnesty for their youth-led campaign on the criminalisation of activism in Puerto Rico - that the traditional “theory of change” that campaigners often develop before launching their campaign should not be treated as a specific pathway to follow from beginning to end, but rather an initial hypothesis that is continually updated as you trial different tactics and see how the system responds. The campaign originally aimed to tackle both the stigma and criminalisation of activism in Puerto Rico. But shortly after the campaign launched, there were huge protests across Puerto Rico, showing that activism wasn't as stigmatised as thought. It also wasn't as criminalised as anticipated, despite new laws being brought into place. So the young campaigners pivoted and changed their campaign accordingly.



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## **Facilitate collaboration and convergence of multiple perspectives**

An important element of systems thinking is bringing multiple stakeholders with different perspectives together in order to arrive at a common understanding of a complex system, identify levers of change needed to achieve systemic change (known as “leverage points”) and coalesce around a shared strategy to shift those leverage points. This collaborative process “can generate shared language as well as rich content for stakeholders — creating new opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and ideas that can improve outcomes” ([Democracy Fund](#)).

For example, [Re-Amp’s systems analysis process](#) involved 12 NGOs and 7 foundations. The “resulting map—and the conversations it sparked—enabled participants to begin to understand the multiple forces animating regional energy systems” whilst also helping “the group build trust, generate meaningful insights, and ultimately align on a single overarching goal: they decided they would try to reduce pollution from the electric sector 80 percent by 2030”.

## **What this requires (people, resources, etc.)**

More than anything, systems thinking requires a **mindset shift** in the way we think about change and *how* we should go about driving systemic change through our work. This mindset is grounded in some **key principles** which make up the foundations of systemic campaigning and organizing:

### **Focus on relationships and interactions**

Systems thinking is often contrasted with reductionist thinking, in which we break up a problem or issue into its constituent parts and analyse each one separately. Systems thinking on the other hand tries to facilitate an understanding of the “whole” by focusing on the relationships, interactions and patterns that occur *between* the elements that make up a system. Such an approach requires a shift in the way we think about campaign targets, SmartCSOs explain in [Reimagining Activism](#): “the main enemy is the system and the culture that supports it – they shape everyone’s behaviour.”



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A key feature of complex systems is the presence of nonlinear relationships, so that a change in one part of the system can reverberate across the system and end up affecting the same part of the system where the change originated (known as a *feedback loop*). These nonlinear relationships allow systems to have properties (known as *emergent properties*) that cannot be understood by looking at the individual parts of the system in isolation (thus the well-known phrase: “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”). Consequently, understanding the dynamic relationships that produce these patterns of behaviour is essential to be able to drive systems change.

**Principle in practice:** Campaigners have integrated tools that draw on (social) network analysis techniques into their campaign design processes in order to map the web of relationships that exist between key stakeholders and identify strategies to shift these relationships. For example, *New Tactics in Human Rights* developed the [tactical mapping tool](#) for mapping out the relationships between people and institutions that surround human rights abuses, so that activists can identify which relationships should be influenced in order to effectively intervene. The tool has been used to [identify levers of change on a range of different human rights issues](#), including torture in Turkey and Mongolia, “Mob Justice” in Liberia, and health-care services for refugees in Minnesota.

More on how to apply these kinds of tools to campaigns in our sister guide to this one on [“System Mapping for Campaign Design”](#).

## **Put pressure on leverage points**

Systems thinking encourages identifying a few select *leverage points* in a system and targeting those with your strategy. Leverage points are highly sensitive places in the system where small changes can bring about large shifts in system behaviour. They are typically characterised by a *high level of interconnection* with other elements in the system (again, highlighting the importance of analysing the relationships between the elements of a system rather than the individual elements by themselves). Thus one of the core principles of systemic activism according to [SmartCSOs](#) is: “Always look for effective leverage points and root causes. Frame your campaigns around them.”

For [NEON](#), however, systemic campaigning is not just about identifying *any* kind of leverage point, but going a step further and finding levers of change that can challenge







“prevailing power relations and systems of oppression: either by tackling the most powerful political, social and economic forces or by building a new power base.”

**Principle in practice:** The [Re-Amp Network](#)'s collaborative system mapping process [enabled them to identify four critical leverage points](#) for reaching their goal of reducing pollution from the electric sector 80 percent by 2030: stopping the building of all new coal power plants; retiring most of the region's existing coal plants; replacing coal-generated electricity with renewable power; and reducing overall electric consumption through increased efficiency. Additionally, their system map made them realise that “unless they coordinated to work on those four levers simultaneously, they wouldn't make progress.”

## **Unlock change**

Systems approaches seek to go beyond trying to “fix” broken parts of the system (*imposing* change) and focus instead on *unlocking* forces that can enhance the system's overall health and its capacity to improve the issues we work on. This requires finding ways to strengthen forces of positive change within the system and weaken the forces that are causing it to produce undesirable outcomes. A useful analogy used by [the Omidyar Group](#) on this point is the difference between treating individual diseases in the human body as they arise and ensuring a healthy lifestyle and environment so that the body is more resilient and less exposed to disease.

In campaigning / organising terms, this means *identifying and strengthening emerging trends and alternatives* that are already working to destabilise the current system and shift it towards the future we want to build. This also means that systemic campaigns should act “as a carrier for new cultural stories: either by weakening damaging stories (like gender is binary, humans must control nature, migrants are dangerous, etc.), strengthening alternative stories (we are nature, no-one is illegal, etc.) or creating new ones (gender is a spectrum, 99% etc.)” ([NEON, Systemic Campaigns Framework](#)). In this way, they can not only call out the problem, but also point to possible alternatives and inspire hope for change.

This principle also applies to unlocking the forces for change *within* our campaigns and movements. In this regard, systems approaches eschew top-down, command-and-control strategies in favor of bottom-up, decentralised strategies (such as [distributed](#)



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[organising](#) / [open campaigning](#)), as these kinds of strategies have more potential to unlock the conditions for new leadership, power and forces for change to emerge from the grassroots. The concepts of [self-organisation and self-organising systems](#) are particularly relevant here and have been used to inspire multiple campaigns and movements, including the [Gasfield Free Northern Rivers Alliance](#), [Extinction Rebellion](#) and the [Ayni Institute's movement training programmes](#).

A key lesson from these approaches is that fomenting self-organisation requires striking a balance between avoiding tight constraints (many top-down rules and structures), but also putting enough constraints and structures in place to ensure that all the local-level self-organisation pulls in the same direction. Additionally, it's essential to ensure the constraints and structures that are put in place "do not reproduce and internalise the oppressions that we seek to overcome" ([NEON, Systemic Campaigns Framework](#)).

***Principle in practice:*** *Greenpeace Philippines' systems change campaign to promote ecological forms of agriculture in the face of the growing encroachment of industrial agriculture was built around the key insight that other farmers had great influence on farmers' decisions. They therefore focused on counteracting Monsanto's powerful relationship to local agriculture by mobilising and strengthening the existing network of farmer-to-farmer relationships so that they could enhance the ability of farmers to connect with, learn from, and rely upon their fellow farmers. At the same time, they worked to support existing eco-agriculture influencers to effectively spread information. These tactics were combined with more "conventional" campaign tactics targeting Monsanto, Big Agriculture and GMOs in the public sphere and in the supreme court.*

## **Embrace uncertainty; plan to learn and adapt**

Although on the one hand, systems approaches promote identifying leverage points to bring about change, they also caution against, for the reasons outlined above, what Tim Harford calls "[The God Complex](#)": the belief that with a good enough planning process you can identify silver bullets and perfectly predict how your change strategy will unfold step-by-step.

This means that, when planning your campaign, systems thinking tools should be thought of as a way to make more strategic decisions about your overall direction of



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travel, not something that will provide you with “the answer.” As [Greenpeace explains](#): “we cannot truly understand a system without trying new things, making mistakes, and learning from them... We need to work within ambiguity. Embracing it boosts our adaptability, responsiveness, and ability to take action despite uncertainty.” The [Cynefin Framework](#) mentioned earlier is particularly useful for orientating this kind of approach.

In this sense, embracing uncertainty and ambiguity from the outset can also be liberating in the face of what can often feel like insurmountable levels of complexity in the problems we are trying to tackle: we are relieved of the burden of thinking we have to develop a perfect understanding of the problem in order to be able to develop a flawless “theory of change” and strategy. Instead, we use a systems approach to guide us in developing an initial understanding of the problem and to identify some potential levers of change that can form the basis of a shared strategy. At the same time we accept that our understanding and our strategy are not final or complete, but instead will continue to develop through an ongoing process of learning and adaptation as we start implementing activities on the ground.

Envisioning an adaptive strategy from the start also enables you to seize unexpected opportunities as they arise by adapting your strategy accordingly, as Greenpeace were able to do with their eco-agriculture campaign in the Philippines.

***Principle in practice:*** Amnesty International has applied a systems approach to multiple campaigns. They described the adaptive approach entailed by systems practice as akin to extending a digital approach (which frequently employs [A/B testing](#) to trial different tactics and messages) to all kinds of campaign tactics, not just ones in the digital realm. This means intentionally deploying multiple tactics in the knowledge that some will work better than others, seeing how the system responds and then adapting and evolving your strategy accordingly by adjusting or withdrawing less effective tactics, boosting more effective tactics and adding new tactics as needed.

## **Engage multiple perspectives and be critical of your own**

A central tenet of systems approaches (specifically, what are known as *soft system* approaches) is that “systems are in the eye of the beholder.” This means that different



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people can look at the same system and perceive it in very different ways, depending on their worldviews, inbuilt assumptions, life experiences and goals. These diverse perspectives represent a key source of complexity in the systems we engage with. To give a simple example: different people can look at the same prison system and see it as a system to provide punishment, or rehabilitation, or protection for society, or a deterrent, or a profit, and so on. This insight has some important implications for campaigning and organising.

Firstly, it means that if a campaign or organising strategy is to be effective in driving systems change, it is imperative that it meaningfully engages with a diverse range of stakeholders with different perspectives, in particular those directly affected by the issue. This not only leads to a more complete understanding of the systems we seek to change, but it also means our planning processes can be important engines of change in and of themselves, as they can lead to multiple stakeholders coming together, appreciating the contrasting perspectives of others, and arriving at a shared understanding of the system, as well as what is needed to change it.

This means that systems approaches to campaigning and organising are inherently collaborative and participatory. However, it also means that they are time-consuming as it's essential they provide the time and space needed to allow deep conversations to happen between different stakeholders.

Secondly, it means we should be critical of our own perspectives so we can understand how our own life experiences, inbuilt assumptions and underlying belief systems shape our perceptions of the systems we seek to change. This leads to both humility with regards to our own perspectives and empathy for the perspectives of others, which “helps us resist judgement, question assumptions, understand and appreciate motivations, and ultimately build stronger campaigns” ([Greenpeace](#)).

***Principle in practice:*** For the One Campaign, a key priority when using a systems approach to rethink their flagship global health campaigns was ensuring that a diverse group of people across their organisation and partners were brought together to participate in the planning and design process. This meant balancing people from different countries and continents (e.g. from both donor countries and recipient countries of overseas aid), as well as people working at different levels: some dedicated to high-level policy and advocacy, whilst others working on the ground at the grassroots level.



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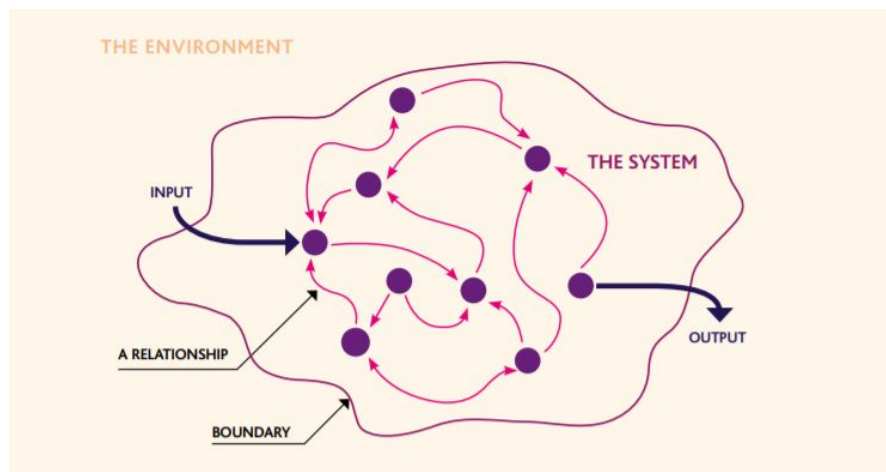
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## Setup + stages

### 1. Identify the system you want to change and set out your vision for that change

In systems thinking, we see the complex, wicked problems that we want to address as resulting from the interactions between the elements and forces of a “system.” Consequently, the first step of a systems approach involves identifying the system that you want to change. However, this can lead us to the question: what do we mean when we talk about “a system”?

A “system” in systems thinking is understood to be a collection of *interdependent elements*, connected through a series of *relationships*, that interact to fulfil a *purpose* (which can be intentional or unintentional). Systems are separated from their *environments* by their *boundaries* (although they also interact with their environments). The diagram below, from [NPC’s guide to Systems Change](#), provides a basic illustration:



A system can be a real-world, intentionally designed system (e.g. the education system in X), or a subsystem of a broader system (e.g. a system to ensure student wellbeing in X). Systems can also be less tangible (e.g. a system that facilitates corruption), and they do not have to be designed intentionally (e.g. an ecological system).



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When defining the system you want to engage with, tools like problem trees or root-cause diagrams can be helpful for drilling down to the issue, and the surrounding system, that you want to focus on and target.

However, during this process, it is also vital to critically analyse where you set the system boundaries. As Smart CSOs explains in their [Reimagining Activism guide](#): “Setting the system boundaries is fundamental. Many system change projects and approaches are not tackling the real root causes because the wrong system boundaries are set. Many of today’s crises (e.g. ecological, social) might be ameliorated if looked at in a sub-system (e.g. food), but in order to identify more effective leverage points we need to go deeper and beyond these system boundaries: ultimately today’s major crises are global and deeply cultural... They are tied up with our economic, political and social systems in the broadest sense.” This was a key insight for the ONE Campaign when they revamped their global health campaigning to look beyond the narrow scope of preventing particular illnesses, and address the larger intersectional issues surrounding health and wellness.

Once you’ve agreed upon a system that you want to change, it’s important to build a collective vision of where you’re trying to get to. This vision will orientate all the future exercises. [The Omidyar Group](#) suggests framing your vision as:

- A “**guiding star**”: a long-term aspirational state for the system that you will work towards. It serves as “a navigational tool for the long haul as your team impacts the system and adapts over time.” The following format can be useful for developing a guiding star: “*Our guiding star is a [name of system] that produces [desired condition]*”.
- A (provisional) “**near star**”: a shorter- term desired outcome for the system that would represent a significant step towards your guiding star. A near star should be considered provisional “since it is highly likely that your near star will be revised as you continue to learn new things about the ever-changing system.”

See page 18 of their [Systems Practice guide](#) for examples of guiding stars and near stars.



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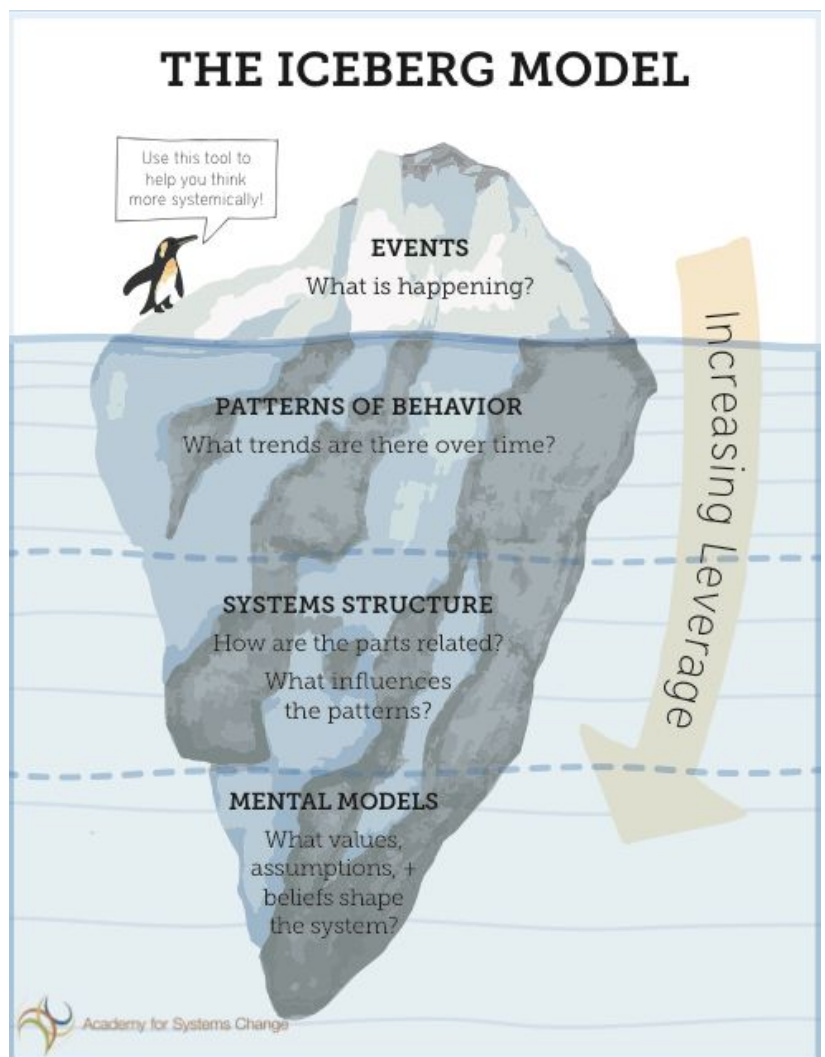
## 2. Map the system

After you've got a clearer idea of what the system is you want to change, the next step is to map that system in order to identify areas where you can intervene with your campaign to create impact. Before starting this, it can be useful to establish a simple framing question to guide your analysis, e.g. "What forces account for the current levels of human slavery in corporate supply chains?" ([Omidyar Group](#)).

One of the most widely used systems thinking frameworks for this step is the [iceberg model](#), shown in the following diagram. This framework posits that, in order to achieve systemic change, one must go beyond simply reacting to events as they happen or even trying to prepare for such events in the future, towards working to **transform the structures and mental models** that keep the current system in place. This means we first need to develop an understanding of the structures and mental models of the system, which we can achieve through a process of system mapping.

### Levels 1 and 2: Events and patterns of behaviour

A useful way to approach this level of analysis is to develop a *timeline of key events* related to the issue you are working on. You can also begin from a root cause you identify at the start, answering "what is happening" instead of needing a specific event.



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MobLab calls this “[system surfing](#)” and recommends analysing the timeline with the following questions to *identify patterns*: From these events, what patterns or trends can the group see? What are the long-term behaviours of the system that creates this problem?

The [systems archetypes](#), patterns of behaviour that frequently manifest themselves in complex systems, can also be useful to help you spot some recurring patterns and can provide you with some initial insights into the underlying system structures driving them.

### Level 3: Underlying system structures

This level of analysis focuses on analysing the key **forces and relationships** *between* the different parts of the system. Whilst there are many tools you can use for this purpose, two that have been frequently used by campaigners are **system maps** and **network maps**. We provide an overview of these tools here, but provide a full explanation of how to use them in a campaign design process in our [System Mapping for Campaign Design guide](#).

System maps<sup>1</sup> (also known as relationship maps or causal loop diagrams) are used to analyse the interdependent web of relationships and forces between the *elements* of a system. Network maps on the other hand are used to analyse the network of relationships and the flow of resources between the *key stakeholders* in a system.

System maps and network maps are in many ways complementary when used for campaign planning. For example, you can use a system map to identify some overarching leverage points to focus your campaign on. A network map can then be used to take your analysis a level deeper to identify where and how you need to apply pressure in order to shift the levers of change you have identified.

There are additional tools and methods you can use for mapping system structures. For example, [MobLab](#) & [SmartCSOs’ propose](#) a more loosely structured system mapping process that involves:

1. Identifying the system’s core elements (which can be both tangible, e.g. people, things, institutions; or intangible, e.g. values or beliefs)

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<sup>1</sup> “Systems map” is a broad term that can encompass lots of different techniques. In these guides we use it to refer specifically to causal-link diagrams, one of the most widely used systems thinking tools.





2. Drawing lines to represent the relationships between them (these can be any kind of relationship)
3. Analysing the system map from different perspectives. For example, looking at: who is *benefiting and losing* from the current system (identifying who has / does not have *power* in the system); how the system is *behaving* and what this says about its *purpose* (which may be different from its stated goals); the *beliefs, rules and norms* of the system; and areas of the system that are *emerging or declining*.

Another commonly used tool are [rich pictures](#), originally developed as a step in the [soft-systems methodology](#), which allow you to create a more free-flowing drawing of a complex system and its interdependencies, and can be great for unleashing creativity.

#### **Level 4: Mental Models**

Mental models are the underlying values, beliefs and assumptions that work to shape the system and hold it in place. One of the most common ways campaigners have grappled with understanding the mental models that shape the systems they seek to change is by analysing the *narratives and stories* that surround an issue. For example, Amnesty's campaign on the criminalisation of activism in Puerto Rico approached this task by working with young people to understand how they were taught about the issue, analyse relevant newspaper articles and find out what neighbours think about the issue.

One particularly useful tool for this level of system mapping, from the [Center for Story-based Strategy](#), is *narrative power analysis*. This tool breaks up the opposition's / status quo's story into five key narrative elements and then analyses how these core elements work to hold the current system in place. We explore how to use this tool as part of a system mapping process for campaign design [in this guide](#).

### **3. Find leverage**

Once you've mapped the system, the next step is to identify leverage points (see [above](#)) within that system you can put pressure on through your campaign.

A useful framework for identifying leverage points comes from Donella Meadows' seminal article "[Places to intervene in a system](#)", in which she identified 12 leverage points and ordered them from the more basic and least impactful to the hardest to change but which create the greatest impact. These are summarised below:



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Type of Leverage	Leverage Point	Definition & Examples
Parameters	12. Numbers	Constants and parameters such as subsidies, taxes, budget allocations and standards that define the rates at which things happen in the system.
	11. Buffers	Buffers (e.g. capital requirements for banks) are stabilising elements - increasing their size enhances a system's stability and vice versa.
	10. The structure of stocks and flows	This is the structure of the system itself (e.g. physical, social & institutional infrastructure) and how things flow through it.
Feedback	9. Delays	The lengths of time it takes to change elements of the system and/or between a change in one part of a system and the effect(s) it produces on another part.
	8. Negative feedback loops	The strength of balancing feedback loops relative to the impacts they are trying to correct or stabilise (see our <a href="#">Systems Mapping guide</a> for info on balancing & reinforcing loops)
	7. Positive feedback loops	The strength of virtuous or vicious reinforcing loops
Design	6. Information flows	The structure of who does and does not have access to what kinds of information
	5. The rules of the system	For example incentives, punishments and constraints / regulations.
	4. Evolution & self-organisation of the system	The power to add, change, or evolve system structure - strengthening the system's ability to change itself and adapt to changes in the environment.
Intent	3. The goals of the system	The purpose or function of the system
	2. The system mindset & paradigm	The mindset out of which the system—its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters—arises.
	1. The power to transcend paradigms	Being able to challenge fundamental assumptions and the values and mindsets that led to them. The ability to propose new systems.





It's important to note that this framework does not imply you should not work on leverage areas higher up in the list - these, in fact, can often be useful entry points and can create impact in the shorter-term, generating momentum for your campaign. However, it does posit that, if you want to achieve deeper, systemic change, then you should have a longer-term strategy that focuses on leverage points further down the list.

There are also some specific techniques that can help you identify leverage points in the maps of system structures and mental models you developed in the previous step. We explain in depth how to apply these techniques in our [system mapping for campaign design guide](#), which also has examples of leverage points identified by campaigners who have applied these tools to their campaign design processes.

A useful tool to bring together your analysis of leverage points comes from [MobLab](#), based on [SmartCSOs model for system change](#), which classifies leverage points along three levels and posits that social change strategies should work across these multiple levels at the same time (so you should identify at least one leverage point per level):

- 1. Institutions:** How can we destabilise and/or strengthen the key structures or relationships we have identified?
- 2. Culture:** What is the change in culture that needs to happen? What are the beliefs and values we want to promote through this?
- 3. Emerging alternatives:** Are there any alternatives (technological, alternative movements etc.) that we can amplify?

#### **4. Develop an adaptive strategy**

Once you've identified the leverage points you want to focus on, the next step is to develop and implement a campaign strategy focused on shifting these leverage points. At this point, the process converges with more traditional campaign design processes in that you will focus on choosing your targets and tactics to influence the chosen leverage points; analysing your audiences; crafting your campaign narrative or story (you can use the same narrative elements from CSS' methodology mentioned above); setting performance indicators; developing campaign tools, materials and infrastructure, etc.



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However, it is also at this point that you should build in mechanisms for learning and adaptation. In practice, this means developing multiple tactics and testing them on a small scale to evaluate how effective they are in practice and then adapting the strategy accordingly (following the Probe - Sense - Respond cycle explained above).

The following questions (adapted from the [Omidyar Group guide](#)) can guide you through each iteration of this process:

- 1. Uncover key learnings** - What are the most important things you have observed and learned? What has most surprised you? Why? What has been most and least effective about your efforts and strategy to date?
- 2. Assess the ways your team needs to update its systems analysis** - How have your observations and the effectiveness (or not) of your efforts helped you to better understand the system? Does this better understanding require updating your system maps / analysis / theory of change?
- 3. Assess the ways your team needs to update its strategy** - What emerging opportunities/risks have you identified? How are you addressing them? Are you engaging the right dynamics in the system or do you need to try a change? How have you adjusted your strategy in response to what you have learned?
- 4. Update your performance indicators accordingly**

[MobLab's campaign canvas](#) is useful for this process - simply print out a big version, stick it on your wall, fill it with post-it notes and then change the post-its accordingly as you progress through cycles of action, reflection, learning and adaptation.

## Tricky Parts + Fixes

### Getting lost in complexity

It's easy to get bogged down in the complexity of the problems we're trying to solve, and ultimately all of this is more art than science. Ultimately we need to actually start campaigning before we have the answers, and it is essential that we integrate a learning approach that gets us nearer and nearer to the outcomes we seek.

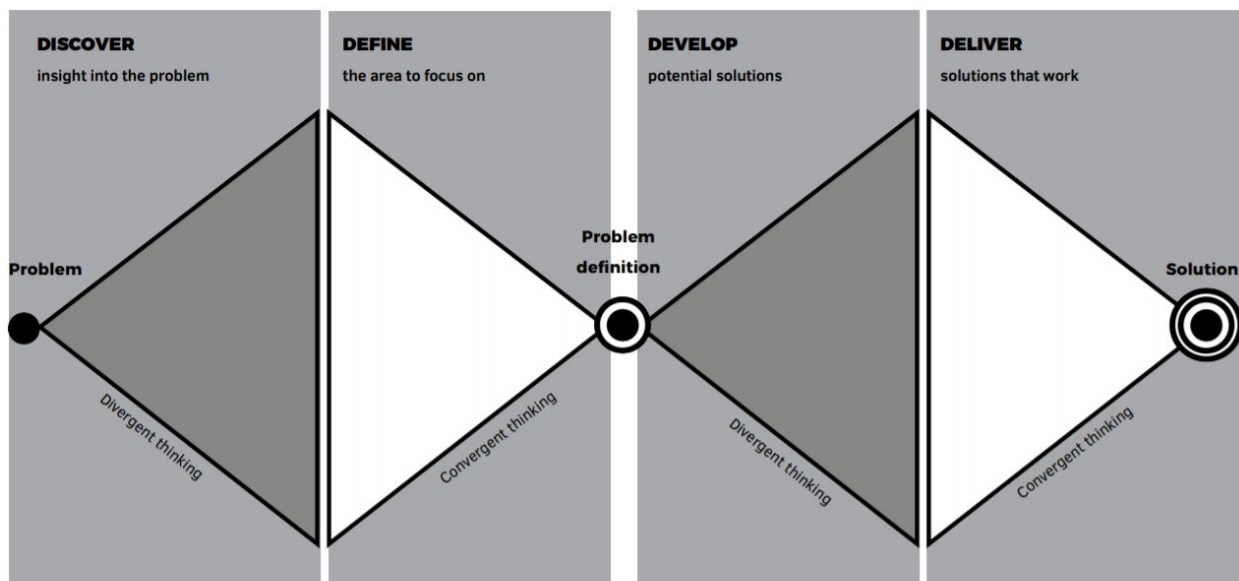


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Going through cycles of *divergent thinking*, where you deliberately cast a wide net with your analysis, followed by *convergent thinking*, where you hone in, synthesise and refine your analysis, is also a useful approach to avoid getting lost in complexity. Such an approach is often represented as a “double diamond” process, as shown in the diagram below (from [MobLab’s campaign accelerator methodology](#)). Note that whilst this is depicted as a “double” diamond, you can have as many iterations of the divergent and convergent process as needed (for both the discover-define phase and the develop-deliver phase), where each iteration builds on the last to explore in more depth the specific ideas and insights that have arisen.



(Double Diamond, British Design Council 2012)

## Further resources

For a deeper dive into the nuts and bolts of systems campaigning, we recommend:

### Online guides and toolkits:

- MobLab’s [Campaign Accelerator](#) - see in particular [Module 1: Define](#)
- Greenpeace’s [Systems Change Campaigning Toolkit](#)
- NEON’s [Systemic Campaigns Framework](#) and [Systemic Movements Primer](#)



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- Smart CSOs have published [multiple guides on systemic activism](#). The [Re-Imagining Activism guide](#) (and [accompanying toolkit](#)) and [The Systems Thinking Workbook](#) are particularly recommended
- Center for Story-based Strategy's [Re-Imagining Change Guide](#)
- [The Omidyar Group's Systems Practice Guide](#)
- NPC's [Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it](#)
- [Introduction to Systems Thinking](#)
- [The Visual Representation of Complexity](#) (key systems thinking and complexity theory concepts explained)
- [FSG - Systems Thinking Resources](#)
- [Liberating Structures](#) Facilitation Tools

### **Books:**

- [Thinking in Systems: A Primer \(Donella H. Meadows\)](#)
- [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds \(Adrienne Maree Brown\)](#)

### **Online courses:**

- [Ayni Institute's SWARM trainings on decentralized organization](#), which draw on complexity theory - free
- [Systems Practice \(Acumen+ / The Omidyar Group\)](#) - free
- [Systems thinking and practice \(OpenU\)](#) - free
- [Mastering systems thinking in practice \(OpenU\)](#) - free
- [Managing Complexity: A Systems Approach \(OpenU\)](#) - free
- [Systems thinking and complexity \(FutureLearn\)](#) - free
- [Systems Kumu eLearning Environment](#) - free
- [Systems Thinking \(UNSchools\)](#) - \$99

### **Articles & case studies:**

- [The Dawn of Systems Leadership](#)
- [Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System](#)
- [A Leader's Framework for Decision Making](#) (on Cynefin Framework)
- Leyla Acaroglu's [Disruptive Design](#) blog



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*Blueprints  
for Change*

- [Making the Jump to Systems Thinking](#)
- [Using Story to Change Systems](#)
- [Enabling emergence: the Bentley blockade and the struggle for a gasfield in the Northern Rivers](#)
- [Transformer: How to build a network to change a system. A Case Study of the RE-AMP Energy Network](#)

## Who can help with this?

- [Mobilisation Lab](#)
- [NEON](#)
- [Ayni Institute](#)

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