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A method to include system mapping in strategic planning

Boltwood, Alana and Quintero Rawlings, Frances

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A Method to Include System Mapping in Strategic Planning

Information about an RSD8 session proposed by:

Alana Boltwood & Fran Quintero Rawlings, OCAD University

Alignment with RSD8 Programme

Area of Focus: Systemic Design and Governance: Policymaking and Decision Making

Proposed structure: Activity Group

Thematic questions:

- How can organizations engage and activate networks for reimagining livelihoods and the platforms for supporting them?
- What is the role of leaders—including designers—in designing sustainable solutions that reimagine the interconnectivity of social, technical and ecological infrastructures?

Abstract

Systems thinking is used to make sense of complexity, but is not always carried through to support decisions to take actions to make the envisioned social change. Further, systemic design practices are not commonly used in the social sector. Capacity, capability, and resource constraints often create barriers to the interest and adoption of systemic design practices, leading to missed opportunities and limited change in this sector.

We propose a more accessible methodology to incorporate systems thinking into the Strategic Planning process, which commonly determines where resources will be allocated, and what programs and services are offered by non-profit and public-sector organizations.

This methodology helps stakeholders make sense of a complex social system, by participating in mapping the system: first as an unstructured Rich Picture, then with a structured cause-and-effect model diagram. Stakeholders then ideate and prioritize possible actions using criteria and facilitated comparison methods.

Using the system maps may prompt revisions to other parts of the strategic plan. For example, with a clearer understanding of the inter-connectivity of the system, social service organizations can leverage this knowledge to direct their offerings to more strategic and fundamental short-term objectives. The system map can also be a foundation for creating a longer-term vision (desired future state). Further, a more qualified Theory of Change can be derived from the cause-and-effect model.

Involving stakeholders in this integrative sense-making and transparent decision-making (akin to co-design) can help to facilitate greater “buy-in” to an organization’s strategies. Planning programs and initiatives with higher systemic influence could lead to better outcomes for the population served by an organization.

At RSD8, participants will be invited to test and provide feedback on this methodology, using a case study about social isolation of people living in poverty. Participants may be able to adopt or adapt the methodology for strategic work with any kind of organization.

Keywords

complexity

social systems

systemic design

system map

soft systems

rich picture

causal loop diagramming

sense-making

decision-making

prioritization

strategic planning

facilitation

non-profit organization

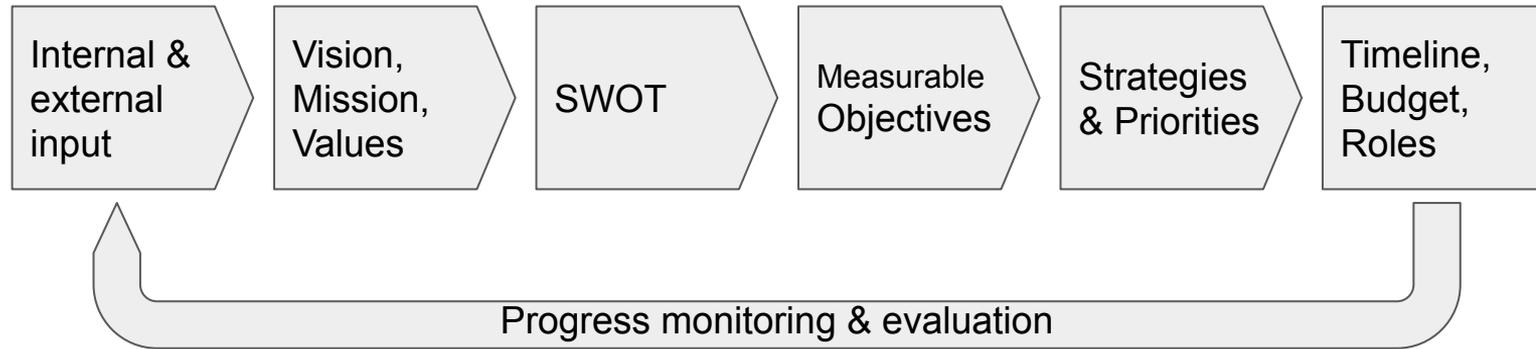
social sector

social isolation

poverty

Common strategic planning for non-profits

Strategic plans are commonly for 3-5 year durations.

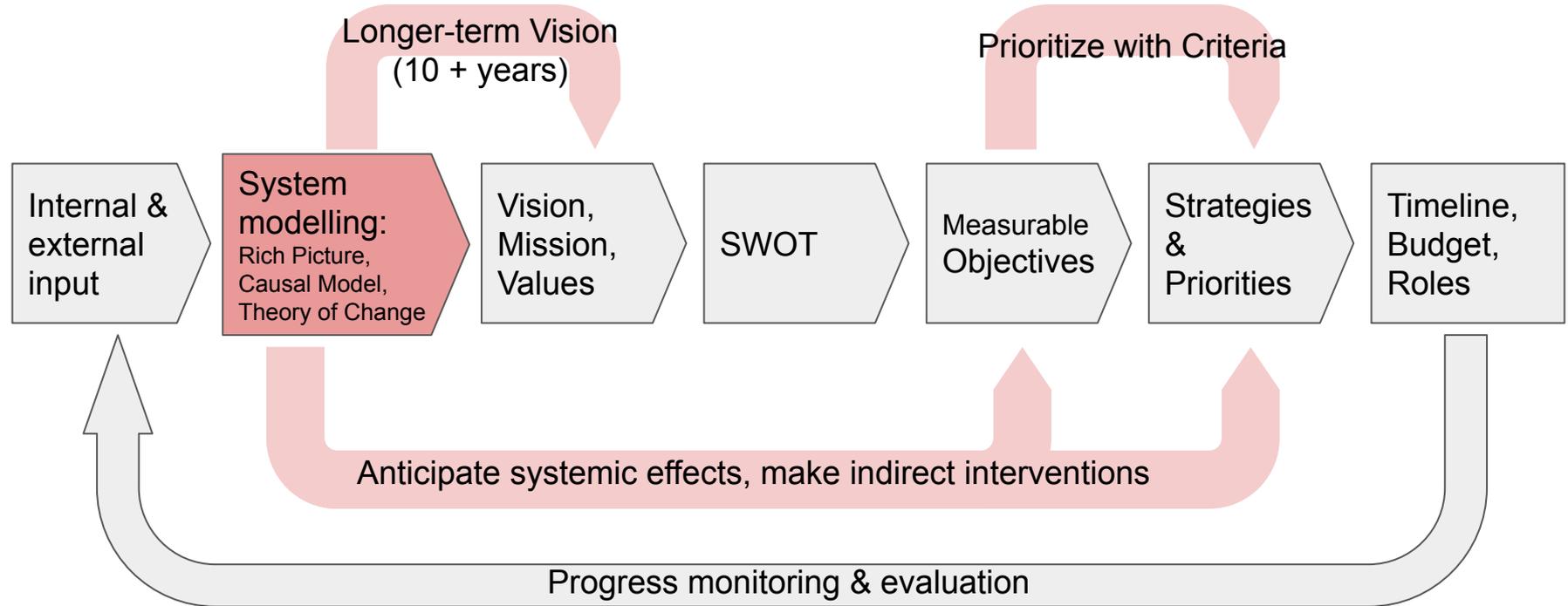


Ten online guides to non-profit strategic planning were reviewed (see [Slide 11](#)) to compile this list of steps. Most of these guides do not mention systems thinking tools, nor explain how to identify objectives that would have systemic impact.

A few guides mention a Theory of Change without explaining how to make or use it. A Theory of Change or Logic Model may be created separately to justify a program, but this is not always a common practice.



Proposed modification to strategic planning



Session Agenda

1. Presentation: the need for, and a method for, including systems modelling in strategic planning (10 minutes)
2. Facilitated group work to test the method with a case study (40 minutes)
 - a. Split attendees into participants and observers, if numbers suffice
 - b. Read a 1-page handout about *Social isolation of people living in poverty*
 - c. Draw a Rich Picture (unstructured model) of the system
 - d. Draw a causal model (causal loop diagram) of an area with potential for change
 - i. Use “9 Whys” facilitation method from Liberating Structures
 - e. Identify possible interventions to improve social isolation, on sticky-notes
 - f. Prioritize the possible interventions, using a scatter-plot
 - i. Rank by effectiveness along a horizontal axis
 - ii. Rank by feasibility (move up or down the vertical axis)
3. Share feedback on the method (10 minutes)

Space and materials needed

- Room where people can stand and move around the whiteboards
- Three whiteboards (or surfaces with wide butcher paper)
- Whiteboard markers
- Sharpies
- Sticky-notes

Bio: Fran

Fran Quintero Rawlings is a systemic designer and consultant. Her diverse work experience has included working frontline in community development, to strategy spanning across multiple sectors including government, non-profits and healthcare.

She is passionate about demystifying systems thinking and creating bridges from bold ideas to action.

Fran is currently completing her Master of Design in Strategic Foresight & Innovation at OCAD University in Toronto. Her major research project is looking at how might social service agencies adopt more systemic design practices to inform their strategic planning for longer-term change.

Bio: Alana

Alana Boltwood is an independent consultant who visualizes patterns to make sense of complex social systems, and thus strategize for change. She has over 20 years' experience with planning, design and data in the Canadian public sector.

Alana recently completed a Master of Design in Strategic Foresight & Innovation at OCAD University in Toronto. Her major research project modelled the causes and effects of urban poverty, and developed facilitation methods for prioritizing policy interventions in that complex system.

Some relevant literature

Theory of Change: Anderson, A. A. (2009). *The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change: A Practical Guide to Theory Development*. New York. Retrieved from http://www.dochas.ie/Shared/Files/4/TOC_fac_guide.pdf

Decision support with system models: Boltwood, Alana (2018). *Making and using large models of complex systems: The Poverty Reduction Model* (Master's Research Project, OCAD University, Toronto, Canada). Retrieved from <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2429/>

Rich Pictures: Checkland, P. B. (1981). *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*. Chichester: Wiley.

Comparing options with criteria: Enz, C., & Thompson, G. (2013). The Options Matrix Tool (OMT): A Strategic Decision-making Tool to Evaluate Decision Alternatives. *Cornell Hospitality Tools*, 4, 6–11. Retrieved from <https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=chrttools>

Facilitation of causal loop diagramming: Hovmand, P. S. (2014). *Community Based System Dynamics*. New York, NY: Springer New York. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-8763-0>

Facilitation: Kimball, L. (2012). *Liberating Structures: A New Pattern Language For Engagement*. [online] Thesystemsthinker.com. Available at: <https://thesystemsthinker.com/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/230101pk.pdf>

Complexity in social change: Westley, F., Zimmerman, B., & Patton, M. Q. (2007). *Getting to maybe: How the world is changed*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

Cynefin Framework definition of complexity: A leader's framework for decision making. Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). *Harvard business review*, 85(11), 68. http://www.academia.edu/download/3459515/A_Leader_s_Framework_for_Decision_Making_-_HBR.pdf

Strategic Planning guides reviewed

These guides were high-ranked results from a Google search for “strategic planning guide non-profit”.

Guides that mention Theory of Change or otherwise hint at systems thinking:

<http://www.upturnstrategies.com/index.php/2017/04/14/non-profit-strategic-planning-process/>

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/strategic-planning-nonprofits>

<https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/nonprofit-management-tools-and-trends/strategic-planning>

<https://bloomerang.co/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-nonprofit-strategic-planning/>

Guides with no mention of systems thinking approaches:

<https://www.marylandnonprofits.org/what-are-the-steps-of-a-nonprofit-strategic-planning-process/>

<https://www.wanonprofitinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Chapter1-PREPARE-Strategic-Planning-Timeline.pdf>

http://www.fnhc.ca/pdf/Strategic_Planning_Guide.pdf

<https://managementhelp.org/freenonprofittraining/strategic-planning.htm>

<https://www.joangarry.com/strategic-planning-nonprofits-just/>

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/create-strategic-plan-nonprofit-29521.html>