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# An Introduction to System Mapping

SEPTEMBER 21, 2015 | JOELLE COOK  
BLOG

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Much has been written recently about the importance of using a system lens, or **focusing on system change**, to make real progress against some of society's toughest challenges. But what does that really mean? The following definition of system change resonated with us, from **NPC's 2015 guide:**

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"Systems change is an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions. It is a journey which can require a radical change in people's attitudes as well as in the ways people work. Systems change aims to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make the system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, communities and values."

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However, to change the system, you need to first understand the system, and mapping is a great way to do that. A "system," as described by Julia Coffman in her 2007 **framework** for evaluating system change, is "a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole." A system's overall purpose or goal is achieved through the actions and interactions of its components.

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are a number of different ways you might approach mapping the system to represent system elements and connections. For example, you might create:

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- **Actor maps**, to show which individuals and/or organizations are key players in the space and how they are connected
- **Mind maps**, that highlight various trends in the external environment that influence the issue at hand
- **Issue maps**, which lay out the political, social, or economic issues affecting a given geography or constituency (often used by advocacy groups)
- **Causal-loop** diagrams, that focus on explicating the feedback loops (positive and negative) that lead to system behavior or functioning

For more information, see a [blog](#) from Innovation Network on systems mapping, Jeff Wasbes' [blog](#) on causal loop diagrams, and an [example](#) from the Hewlett Foundation's Madison Initiative.

In our client work, we've found that mapping the actors in the system (often called "system elements") and their relationship is a useful exercise for creating a common understanding of what's in, and out, of the system. In our evaluation work, system maps are particularly useful in:

- Helping capture the system that we are evaluating, along with its various sub-systems
- Telling the story of the level of complexity of the initiative in a non-linear way
- Helping identify where to focus the evaluation (along with other tools like outcomes maps, timeline maps, theories of change, etc.)

We are currently developing a "how to" guide for creating actor system maps, based on our experience working with clients. We expect to share the system mapping tool this winter. Until then, be on the lookout for more blogs about system mapping in action, using examples from FSG's client work.

How have you used system mapping in your own work? We would love to hear from you about your own experience. Please leave a comment below or email me at [Joelle.Cook@fsg.org](mailto:Joelle.Cook@fsg.org).



**Joelle Cook**  
Associate Director

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