Workshop: Re.imagining our Strategies

2.5 hours (steps 1 – 6 only) 3 – 4 hours (complete session)

minimum 8 participants

AIMS OF THE INTRODUCTORY MODULES

Explore how to make our activism strategies more systemic.

Groups will develop rich picture diagrams of their current activism strategies, and in so doing develop a clear understanding of the explicit and implicit (underlying) values and frames these strategies reinforce. They will start seeing alternative, deeper ways in which their strategies could be transformed to be more systemic.

SESSION SUMMARY

The group will be given a rich picture mapping task and the facilitator will give instructions at intervals throughout the session to help the groups build their rich pictures. Rich picture mapping is a process which encourages collective intelligence to emerge, and to make conscious and subconscious assumptions explicit. It can be a helpful exercise for understanding issues and how they are connected. See examples below of rich pictures.

Groups should consist of 4-5 people each, equipped with large paper and coloured pens/pencils.

This session will be most relevant if participants are already familiar with ideas about the Great Transition, for example, for those who have attended the Introductory modules.

The session will be useful for groups who are interested in exploring these ideas in more detail and in applying them to their real work, such as through their projects and strategic planning.

SESSION SUMMARY

Step 1
Explain the purpose and format of the session.

Step 2
Divide participants into groups of 4-5 people, and invite them to choose a campaign of one of the group members. Even if group members work on a campaign from another organisation, the exercise should be useful and illuminating for everybody.

Ask the group to draw a rich picture diagram of their campaign of choice. This means, they should focus on using images (drawings, symbols, colours), as well as some words, to map out:

• the goals of the campaign
• the actors it seeks to influence
• the institutions, ideas and actions (behaviours, policies, etc) it seeks to change.

Step 3
Invite participants to look at their rich picture, and to think about whether the campaign (activism approach) is reinforcing any unhelpful frames and values. They should write or draw these into their picture (see Guide pp42-49 for more information on framing, and »Introductory modules«).
Step 4
Invite groups to think about the root causes of the problems the campaign is addressing. They should write or draw these in (see Guide pp22-25 for more information on root causes, and Introductory modules).

Step 5
Now invite participants to think about alternative ways in which their campaign could be conceptualised, to address deeper issues.

It is probably easier to start a new picture for the next stage of this exercise. They may continue with the rich picture format or may choose to use more of a mind map format.

Note – participants may feel over-whelmed and not know where to start, since suddenly you are asking them to potentially tackle ‘all problems’. They do not need to go that wide and can continue to build on the themes of the original campaign. The important step will be for them to understand what root causes they are trying to tackle rather than simply tackling short-term solutions, and how they are framing their problem-solution approach.

You can introduce this next stage of the mapping exercise by explaining to participants the 3 phases suggested by the Guide (p40). For the purpose of this exercise we will focus only on Phase One, “Becoming a supporter of the Great Transition”. In starting their new campaign map, participants should therefore use Phase One as their guide:

“frame campaigns in a conscious way by being aware of the values and frames we are communicating”, and

“create system awareness and develop a deep understanding of root causes and leverage points”.

This means:

- Avoid campaign goals that are in any way conflictive with the principles and aims of the Great Transition.
- Design campaigns in a way that it communicates values supportive of the Great Transition, e.g. we should avoid references to consumerist and self-interest values.
- Avoid frames that reinforce the market and growth paradigm for the sake of short-term objectives.

You can help the group work through these guidelines with these questions:

How could your activism approach tackle the root causes better, and focus less on symptoms of the problems?

What are the leverage points in the system, i.e. the weak points in the system, or the parts of the system which have a big influence? How, by changing these, could you influence other parts of the system?

Participants should write or draw these ideas in to their new picture/map.

Step 6
Plenary de-brief: Now is a good time to take stock and to invite groups to share their pictures and reflections with the whole group.

Depending on the readiness of the group and your aims, you may want to complete the session here. Or, if you want to also include a focus on strategic approaches to designing new strategies, continue with the complete session.
Step 7
After the plenary de-brief, participants will continue their work on their campaign maps/ pictures.

If they are not already familiar with the Smart CSOs model (Guide pp 34-37, and Introductory Modules) and activist roles, explain these roles (Guide pp 54-65, and Introductory Modules)

Step 8
Invite the groups to take another look at their new campaign map showing their revisited strategies.

Refer to the 4 roles of systemic activism discussed: the acupuncturist, broker, questioner and gardener.
Ask them to think about how their organisation and other organisations and networks are already taking on the 4 roles of systemic activism. How could they do so more? They can write or draw this in. (You may want to print a picture of the activism roles and functions to give to each group)

They can also connect these roles with the Smart CSOs model and consider whether their activism strategies address the 3 levels of systems change – niches, regimes and culture.

How could they do this more effectively through the 4 roles? Write or draw this in.

Step 9
Ask the groups to look at their original campaigns and at their new strategies. De-brief with the groups in plenary. You may want to focus on the details of the new strategy ideas compared to the current campaigns, or you may want to focus on their learnings and on applying these learnings. Choose your questions accordingly.

If you want to keep the presentations about the strategic approaches brief and focus instead on learnings, then invite each group to share only 2-3 points about their new strategic approach, and give them a time limit of 3 minutes.

The following questions can help guide your discussion.

What has changed?

How do you feel about your new systemic activism strategies compared to the previous/existing campaign?

How realistic are these strategies? If you feel they are not realistic, why not? How could you tackle the barriers?

What opportunities are there in your work environments, organisations, or networks, to bring in these new ideas?

» Pictures of Smart CSOs model «

» Picture of root causes «

» Worksheet with list of 4 roles explained «

» Details on how to draw mind maps «

» More on leverage points by Donella Meadows «
KEY CONCEPTS

Framing

Most civil society campaigns try to convince their audiences through facts and shy away from moral arguments. But we know through research that humans do not think about politics through facts – the subconscious mind influences our behaviour and decisions (p15-18).

Words are not as neutral as we often believe. There is a hidden world underneath the words we use which frame our thinking. Frames operate behind the scenes, affecting how we view things. They are like little stories triggered by the words we hear and the experiences we have. For example the phrase tax relief makes us think of taxes as a burden, as something we need relief from instead of something that contributes to society for our collective benefit (p44-45).

Frames can be engaged deliberately and they are all the time: it’s called framing. The advertising industry is particularly good at framing, or if you like, at manipulating us through its strategic choice of frames. For example, car ads show us empty roads to associate cars with freedom instead of associating them with negative side effects like traffic jams and pollution. (p44-45)

Whenever civil society/activists use words and activate frames in the minds of people, they also transmit unconscious conclusions about the subject of matter. Frames influence the values and the thinking of society around politics too. (p44-45)

Unintentionally, campaigns often activate (and reinforce) in their audiences the values and frames of self-interest and consumerism that are causing the problems in the first place. (p15-18)

Activists who want to determine successfully the political discourse should first clarify their ideological perspective and communicate their moral matters clearly and openly. For example, they should avoid using economic growth as an argument to invest into renewable energy or to receive refugees. This is dishonest and reinforces the frames of self-interest and economic growth. (p44-45)

Alternative framing: Encyclical Laudato Si

„Earth as Home“

→ triggers a frame in which all the people of the world are a family, living in a common home. As a family we should care for each other. A home is something we all depend on, physically and emotionally. (p45)
The alliance between the economy and technology ends up side-lining anything unrelated to its immediate interests”

→ sharply points toward the underlying system logic of market fundamentalism lying behind inequality and the climate crisis. (p45)

“To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system”

→ points towards the need for systemic change to tackle systemic crises. (p45)

Leverage points (pp46-49)

• According to Donella Meadows’ definition, leverage points are places within a complex system (e.g. our global economy) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.

• As systemic activists, our aim should be to find the most powerful leverage points possible or what we call root causes. (p46)

• As a first step, spend time mapping your system or problem of interest. A systems map is a visual representation of a complex system that helps you identify its components, their connections and the rules governing them. (p47)

• Causal loop diagrams help us identify positive and negative feedback loops so we know which direction to push for change. (p47)

• As chains of causes and effects are revealed through analysis, systemic activists can better identify why the system behaves the way it does and which variables they can strategically influence. (p47)

• Some examples that can be considered high or very high leverage points due to their potential to shift the system considerably towards the Great Transition are: reducing working hours, basic income, cooperatives, local currencies and new national indicators of progress (measuring wellbeing for example). (p48)

• Once we have identified a promising leverage point, we need to explore potential windows of opportunity and our strategic capacity to move in this direction. (p48)