

Understanding the nature of place-based challenges

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 6

March 2026



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Tools for Shared Agendas is a series of practical instruments designed to support collective work on place-based challenges under conditions of complexity. The tools build on established frameworks in systems thinking and transformative innovation policy and are adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

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1. Why understanding the nature of challenges matters in the work with Shared Agendas¹

In Shared Agendas, collective action often becomes difficult not because actors lack commitment, but because they approach the same situation with different assumptions about what kind of challenge they are facing.

Some actors expect clear solutions and predictable outcomes. Others assume that uncertainty, experimentation and learning will be unavoidable. When these assumptions remain implicit, collaboration becomes fragmented, expectations clash, and coordination weakens.

Understanding the nature of the challenge is therefore a necessary step before deciding how to act. It allows actors to align their approaches, clarify what can reasonably be planned, and recognise where adaptive action and learning will be required.

At SharedAgendas.org, this tool is used to help actors develop a shared understanding of the type of situation they are dealing with, creating a common orientation for collective action in place-based transformative processes.

2. What this tool enables actors to do

Working with this tool helps actors align their approaches to action more deliberately. It enables actors to:

- recognise that not all challenges can be addressed in the same way,
- avoid treating complex situations as if they were technical or fully controllable,
- acknowledge that different parts of the same situation may require different approaches,
- align expectations about what can be decided upfront, what needs to be tested, and what must first be stabilised.

¹ This analysis and tool build on the Cynefin framework as described by Snowden and Boone (2007), *A Leader's Framework for Decision Making*, Harvard Business Review, and use it as a structured reference for understanding the systemic nature of challenges within Shared Agenda processes.

By creating a shared orientation, the tool supports more effective collaboration, learning and coordination across initiatives.

Understanding the nature of challenges has concrete implications for how collective action is organised. It influences:

- **decision-making** – what can be fixed in advance and what must remain adaptive,
- **forms of coordination** – who needs to be involved and how collaboration is structured,
- **institutional conditions** – rules, procedures and risk management logics,
- **practices** – how work is carried out on the ground,
- **learning and feedback** – how observation, interpretation and adjustment are organised.

Misalignment between the nature of the situation and the way actors respond to it often generates systemic inhibitors. For example, treating complex situations as if they were complicated can lead to rigid plans and weak ownership, while responding to urgency without shared understanding can increase confusion and fragmentation.

3. How SharedAgendas.org works with this tool

At SharedAgendas.org, this tool is used as an early sense-making and orientation device in place-based transformative processes.

It is used to:

- surface implicit assumptions about how change is expected to happen,
- open discussion about uncertainty and limits of control,
- create a shared language for combining different modes of action within the same Shared Agenda.

The purpose of this tool is to support better alignment between the nature of the situation and the way actors respond to it. It is not used to label challenges or to prescribe solutions.

To do so, it distinguishes different types of situations, drawing on an accessible interpretation of the Cynefin².

² Developed by Dave Snowden and further explained in [The Cynefin Framework](#).

Different types of situations and typical responses

Most place-based challenges include elements of several types of situations at the same time. The tool avoids forcing a single logic onto the whole situation but ensures that each element is addressed with an approach that fits its nature.

Simple situations

Cause and effect are clear and predictable. There is a known way of doing things and broad agreement on what works. Typical responses include:

- standard procedures,
- protocols and rules,
- routine execution and compliance.

Complicated situations

Cause and effect exist but are not immediately visible. Several viable solutions may be possible, and expert knowledge is required to analyse options. Typical responses include:

- diagnosis and analysis,
- expert judgement,
- technical instruments and specialised tools.

Complex situations

Cause and effect cannot be known in advance. The system adapts, perspectives differ, and actions generate unexpected effects. Typical responses include:

- experimentation,
- observation and interpretation,
- adjustment over time based on learning.

Responding to complex situations as if they were merely complicated often leads to over-analysis, rigid planning and limited learning.

Chaotic situations

The system is overwhelmed, and immediate action is required to restore a minimum level of stability. Typical responses include:

- acting quickly to contain damage,
- stabilising the situation,

- then shifting toward more appropriate modes of action once order is restored.

Confusion

Confusion arises when actors disagree on the nature of the challenge and respond according to their own assumptions. This often results in incoherent or contradictory action.

Combining different situations within the same challenge

For example, housing affordability typically combines different types of situations:

- **Simple elements**, such as regulatory compliance, building codes or safety standards, where procedures and enforcement are required.
- **Complicated elements**, such as land-use rules, financing mechanisms or taxation instruments, which require expert analysis, negotiation and technical design.
- **Complex elements**, such as changes in living practices, acceptance of new housing models or shifts in local expectations, where outcomes cannot be predicted in advance and learning through experimentation is necessary.
- **Chaotic elements**, which may appear if affordability pressures escalate into sudden displacement or emergency housing needs, requiring immediate action to stabilise the situation before longer-term work can continue.

Using the tool helps actors distinguish these layers and align responses accordingly, instead of treating housing affordability as a single type of problem with a single type of solution.

4. When and how the tool is typically used

This tool is typically used:

- at the start of a Shared Agenda, to align expectations and approaches,
- when collaboration is blocked by mismatched assumptions about the nature of the challenge,
- alongside tools for problem framing, systemic diagnosis, polarities, portfolio design and learning.

It can be revisited as the situation evolves and different dynamics become more prominent.

5. The template to understand the nature of place-based challenges

