

Problem framing wheel

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 2

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 problem framing matters in the work with Shared Agendas¹

In the work with Shared Agendas, collective action often starts from situations that are experienced as problematic but understood differently by the actors involved.

These differences are rarely limited to disagreement over solutions. More often, they reflect different ways of naming the situation, prioritising concerns, interpreting causes, and judging what is feasible or legitimate. Actors approach the same context from different mandates, experiences and responsibilities, which shape how they frame what the problem is and why it matters.

When these framings remain implicit, collective work can become fragile. Actors may assume alignment where none exists, talk past one another, or move too quickly toward actions that respond to only part of the situation. This often results in premature solution-making, unresolved tensions, or coordination efforts that fail to address what others see as central.

Problem framing matters because how a situation is defined shapes the direction of collective work from the outset. It influences what is considered relevant, which options are explored or excluded, and how responsibilities and expectations are distributed. Working explicitly with problem framing therefore creates a necessary foundation for organising collective action that can hold multiple perspectives while maintaining sufficient coherence to move forward.

2. What the problem framing wheel enables

The problem framing wheel enables collective sense-making around how a problematic situation is understood before analysis or action.

In practice, it helps actors to:

- articulate how they understand the situation and what they consider problematic,
- listen to and recognise other framings without needing to converge,

¹ This tool builds on contemporary problem framing approaches in systems practice, including the Problem Framing Canvas developed by Ingrid Burkett (2023), *Problem Framing Canvas Handbook: Making sense of problems for better responses*, Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation, and is adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

- slow down solution-driven dynamics that tend to privilege dominant perspectives,
- clarify what is contested, what is broadly shared, and what remains uncertain.

By making different framings visible and discussable, the wheel helps actors understand how early problem definitions shape later decisions, coordination patterns and choices about where to focus effort and resources.

Rather than resolving disagreement, the tool supports the development of a shared reference point. This shared reference does not require consensus, but it allows collective work to proceed with greater awareness of differences and their implications.

3. How the problem framing wheel is structured

The problem framing wheel organises collective sense-making around four interconnected dimensions:

- **Problem formulations**
How different actors describe, prioritise and bound the problematic situation, including what is emphasised, downplayed or excluded.
- **Underlying causes**
Factors and dynamics that contribute to the situation, including structural, institutional, cultural, social or economic conditions.
- **Consequences**
Effects of the situation on people, practices and systems, including who is constrained, who benefits and who bears the costs.
- **Opportunities**
New possibilities that emerge when the situation is reframed, including alternative ways of understanding what could be influenced or changed.

At the centre of the wheel is the **scope of transformation**: the part of the situation that collective action seeks to influence, recognising that not all aspects can or should be addressed at once.

Working across these dimensions helps actors relate perspectives, causes, effects and possibilities, while keeping the focus on understanding the situation rather than on deciding solutions.

4. How SharedAgendas.org works with the problem framing wheel

SharedAgendas.org works with the problem framing wheel as part of the early phases of work with Shared Agendas, when actors come together around a place-based situation but do not yet share a common understanding of what is problematic or why.

We use the wheel to organise facilitated collective work that:

- surfaces implicit and often competing problem formulations,
- creates space for listening across sectors, roles and forms of knowledge,
- prevents early dominance of a single framing,
- establishes a shared reference before moving into systemic analysis, portfolio design or experimentation.

The wheel is not used to define the problem on behalf of actors or to resolve disagreement. It is used to make different framings explicit and relatable, so that subsequent collective work is grounded in an acknowledged diversity of perspectives rather than in assumed alignment.

This way of working reflects how Shared Agendas take shape in practice: by investing time in shared understanding before coordinating action, and by treating differences in framing as a resource for learning rather than as an obstacle to be eliminated.

5. How the problem framing wheel connects to later work

The problem framing wheel typically precedes tools focused on systemic analysis and coordination.

It informs:

- the **multi-level perspective**, by clarifying how the situation is understood before exploring dynamics across levels and over time;
- the **pentagonal map**, by highlighting which system dimensions are most relevant to the situation;
- work with **polarities**, by making early tensions and differing emphases visible and discussable.

The tool may be revisited later if learning from practice leads actors to reconsider how the situation is framed, or which aspects have become more salient.

In this way, the problem framing wheel supports a progression from listening and shared understanding to more demanding forms of collective work, helping maintain coherence as Shared Agendas evolve over time.

6. The problem framing wheel template

