Problem framing wheel

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 2

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Shared Agendas

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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 Agendas[1]

Shared Agenda processes often start from situations that actors experience as problematic from different positions, responsibilities and forms of knowledge. These differences shape how actors describe the situation, which causes they emphasise, which consequences they consider most relevant, and which possibilities for action they see as viable or legitimate.

Problem framing makes these interpretations explicit. It gives actors a structured way to understand how the situation is being described, what is considered important, and where perspectives converge or diverge. How a situation is framed influences the direction of collective work. It shapes what receives attention, which responsibilities become visible, and which possibilities for action are considered relevant.

For this reason, problem framing is an early step in Shared Agenda processes. It helps actors relate different perspectives and define the scope of transformation that will orient the next stages of work.

2. What the problem framing wheel is used for

The problem framing wheel structures collective sense-making around a place-based problematic situation. It is used to:

- articulate how different actors describe the situation
- identify underlying causes and contributing conditions
- explore consequences for people, practices, organisations and systems
- identify opportunities that emerge when the situation is reframed
- define the scope of transformation for the Shared Agenda

The result is a shared reference that captures different interpretations of the situation and clarifies the part of it that collective action will address.

[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.

3. How the problem framing wheel is structured

The wheel is organised around four dimensions.

- **Problem formulations:** How actors describe, prioritise and delimit the problematic situation.
- **Underlying causes:** Factors and dynamics that contribute to the situation, including institutional, social, cultural, economic or environmental conditions.
- **Consequences:** Effects of the situation on people, practices, organisations and systems, including how costs, constraints and responsibilities are distributed.
- **Opportunities:** Possibilities that become visible when the situation is framed differently, including new priorities, relationships, practices or areas for collective action.

At the centre of the wheel is the scope of transformation. This defines the part of the situation that the Shared Agenda will address.

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

SharedAgendas.org uses the problem framing wheel in the early stages of Shared Agenda processes. The tool is used in facilitated sessions with actors who relate to the same place-based situation from different roles and responsibilities. The discussion brings together how the situation is described, what is considered relevant, and which aspects should orient collective work.

The facilitator organises the discussion around the four dimensions of the wheel and supports the synthesis of the scope of transformation. This scope becomes the reference for later work on system dynamics, facilitators and inhibitors, portfolios of actions and learning.

5. The problem framing wheel template

