Multi-level perspective framework

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 1

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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 understanding system change matters in Shared Agendas[1]

Shared Agenda processes often take place in situations where change does not follow a linear path.

Some initiatives gain traction while others remain marginal. Broader pressures may increase while local practices continue with little visible change. Change may also accelerate after long periods in which the system appeared stable.

These patterns are difficult to interpret through individual initiatives or single decisions. They are shaped by the interaction between broader pressures, dominant practices and emerging alternatives.

The multi-level perspective provides a way to read these dynamics. It helps participants understand how broader developments affect the place-based situation, why existing practices remain stable, and under which conditions alternatives may gain influence.

This shared reading supports collective work under uncertainty. It helps participants interpret why change is gaining traction, slowing down or taking unexpected forms, and how local action relates to wider system dynamics.

2. What the multi-level perspective framework is used for

The multi-level perspective framework structures collective interpretation of how system change unfolds. It is used to:

- understand why dominant practices remain stable
- recognise where pressure for change is building
- identify where alternatives are emerging or gaining influence
- relate local initiatives to broader dynamics
- interpret why change advances differently across places and moments

[1] This tool builds on the Multi-Level Perspective on socio-technical transitions (Geels & Schot, 2007) and subsequent practice-oriented developments within the Transformative Innovation Policy Consortium (TIPC), including resources developed in the TIP Resource Lab. The present version is adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

The result is a shared interpretation of how broader pressures, dominant practices and emerging alternatives interact in relation to the shared direction of system change.

3. How the multi-level perspective framework is structured

The framework is organised around three interconnected lenses.

Pressures and broader dynamics

This lens focuses on developments that shape the context in which place-based action takes place. These may include social, economic or environmental trends, demographic change, technological shifts, market dynamics, long-term risks, external shocks, or policy developments shaped outside the place-based process.

These pressures influence the place-based situation, even when they are largely shaped outside local decision-making.

Dominant practices and system constraints

This lens focuses on the practices, routines and arrangements that currently structure the system. These may include established ways of working, governance arrangements, administrative procedures, regulatory interpretations, investment patterns, infrastructures, professional cultures and dominant narratives.

This lens helps participants understand why the current situation remains stable and why alternatives may struggle to gain influence.

Emerging alternatives

This lens focuses on practices, initiatives or arrangements that work differently from dominant practices. These may include experimental initiatives, alternative forms of coordination or governance, new service, production or ownership models, and changing relationships between organisations and people.

This lens helps participants understand where change is beginning to take form and what conditions may allow alternatives to connect, expand or influence dominant practices.

The three lenses are used together. They help participants relate broader pressures, dominant practices and emerging alternatives, rather than treating them as separate layers. This reading also helps identify the conditions that shape movement towards the shared direction of system change. Some conditions support movement in that direction. Others reinforce the current situation or limit the development of alternatives.

In Shared Agenda processes, these conditions are described as facilitators and inhibitors:

- Facilitators are conditions that support movement towards the shared direction of system change. They may include trust, shared data, adaptive governance arrangements, aligned investment, technical capacity or social legitimacy.
- Inhibitors are conditions that reinforce the current situation or constrain the development, stabilisation or expansion of alternatives. They may include rigid rules, fragmented governance, misaligned incentives, infrastructure gaps or entrenched narratives.

Reading across the three lenses helps participants understand where facilitators and inhibitors are located, how they interact, and why change may advance unevenly across places and moments.

4. How SharedAgendas.org uses the multi-level perspective framework

SharedAgendas.org uses the multi-level perspective framework as a collective sense-making tool in place-based transformation processes.

The framework is usually used in the early stages of a Shared Agenda, once the problematic situation has been framed and before or alongside systemic diagnosis. It can also be revisited later, when new developments change how participants understand the situation.

The template is used in facilitated sessions to organise observations from different participants into a shared interpretation of change dynamics. Participants examine broader pressures, dominant practices and emerging alternatives, and discuss how these interact in relation to the shared direction of system change.

This shared interpretation helps connect local action with wider forces. It also supports more grounded expectations about the pace, direction and form that change may take.

As the process evolves, the framework can be revisited to interpret how system conditions are changing, where alternatives are gaining influence, and where collective action may need to adjust. In this way, it supports coordination and learning while keeping attention on how change is unfolding across levels and over time.

5. The Multi-level perspective template

