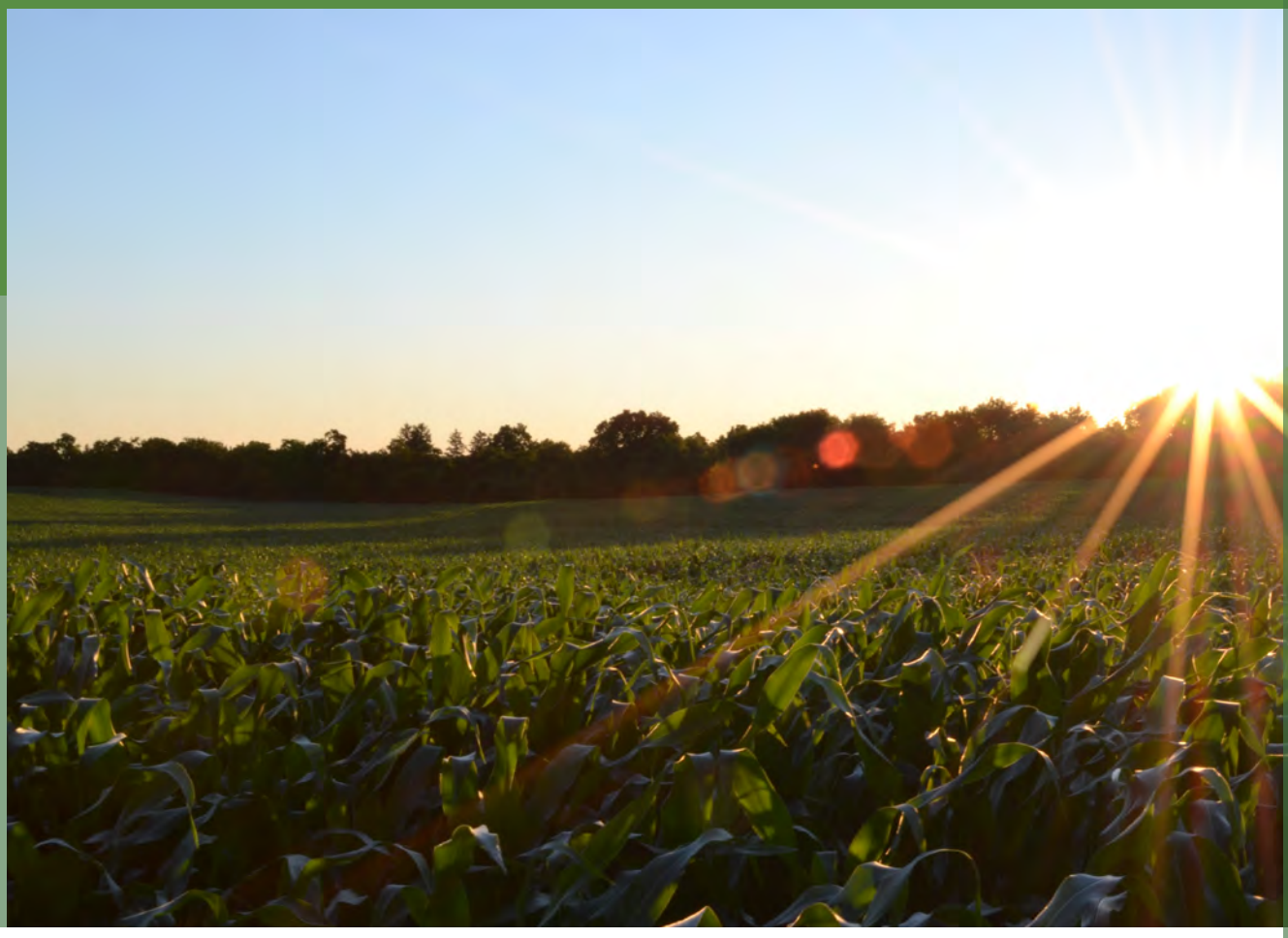
AgriLink Living Lab Toolbox



Andy Lane

Contents

Introduction

This Toolbox describes the different group-based tools or methods used in AgriLink's Living Labs that are mentioned in the online course on **Creating innovative agricultural advisory services through a Living Lab**.

These tools or methods supported our use of design thinking, systems thinking, and reflexive monitoring as covered in sessions 4, 5 and 6 of the online course. They are arranged in alphabetical order and largely cover the instructions we used in our workshops, with some later additions such as some of the diagrams.

You can use the Toolbox as a supplement to the online course and/or to the AgriLink Living Lab Trainers' Handbook.

Each tool description is also provided as a pdf for separate downloading and/or printing for handing out to other people.

AgriLink was a project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The project aimed to help stimulate the transition towards more sustainable agriculture by improving understanding of the role played by agricultural advisors in strengthening knowledge flows, enhancing learning and boosting of innovation on the wide variety of different farm types that exist in Europe.

Dealing with stakeholders

Background

This section is based on training sessions run by Wageningen University and Research (WUR) that were used in a large Dutch crop protection project 'Farm of the Future'. Results of this work were described in Bulten, W., Jansma, J. E. & Potters, J. I. Influence without power: Stakeholder management in practice, Apr 2021, 20 p. Wageningen University & Research. **https://edepot.wur.nl/545717**.

We have indicated in the online course that 'design thinking' informed our processes. This kind of thinking has been found helpful elsewhere in innovation when trying to consider the needs of multiple stakeholders and their contexts. The first phase of design thinking is the 'empathise' phase. Therefore, the first dialogue with stakeholders is targeted on understanding the perspectives, interests, opinions, feelings and ideas of different parties that have a stake in or who influence the subject of the Living Lab. Furthermore, the process of understanding helps to decide who wants to be involved in the Living lab and in what way.

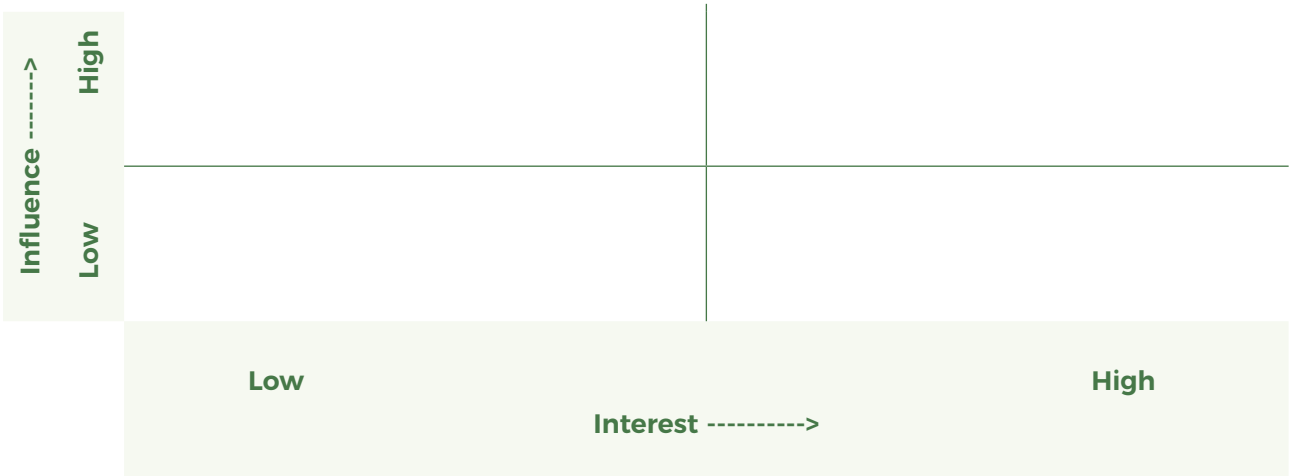
This section provides **guidelines for the first dialogue with stakeholders** that we tried, although the guidelines can apply to other phases of the design thinking process.

The dialogue consists of **three parts**, the first part starts with the **identification** of the main stakeholders, the second consists of semi-structured **interviews** with (representatives of) the main stakeholders involved in the sustainability challenge. The third is an exploratory **workshop** with the key stakeholders.

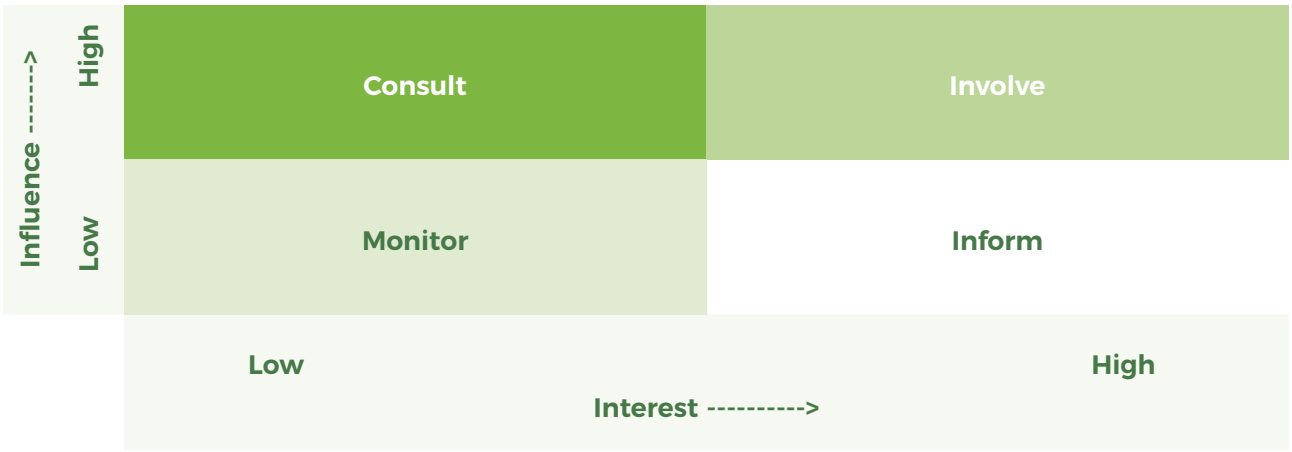
Stakeholder selection

The selection of stakeholders requires due attention to involve all different viewpoints that matter to the [TOPIC OF THE LIVING LAB]. The following steps give some guidance in how to do the selection. In AgriLink, the Living Lab facilitator and the Living Lab monitor did this process together.

1. **Make a list of all groups and individuals** that have interest in the topic of the Living Lab or that influence the success of the Living Lab. Think of the following categories: Different types of farmers, advisers, research, government local, national, business partners consumers, society groups, communities and organisations. Check if you have all stakeholders: Who else has an interest in the subject? Who else influences the developments on the subject?
2. Try to define the level of interest the stakeholder has in the topic and the level of influence he or she has on the subject. **Position the stakeholders in the following matrix:**



3. Then **look at the matrix below** and see in which quadrant the stakeholder stands, the words are mainly an indication of the way different stakeholder groups need to be involved. Please check whether others agree with these placings.



The stakeholders in the upper right green quadrant should be involved in the interview round, the workshop and are serious candidates to participate in the Living Lab. The stakeholders in the purple quadrant should be included in the interview but will probably not participate directly in the workshop or Living Lab. The stakeholder interviews you will be doing next give information on how to consult them in the further Living Lab process. The yellow quadrant represents stakeholders with high interest but not much influence on the subject. This group can be interviewed to understand their interest and determine an appropriate role in the further Living Lab processes. They should be informed about the progress of the Living Lab.

4. **Make a list of stakeholders you need** to directly involve through an interview. As an indication, we suggest you have at least 10 interviews with the most important stakeholders, the following numbers give an idea how to divide your energy: Farmers (4), Advisors (2), Research (1), Government (1), NGO (1), Market player (1). The farmers and advisors were the most important stakeholders in the Agrilink Living Lab. Make sure you capture the diversity of perspectives within these groups.
5. Some stakeholder groups will need **representation**. Identify appropriate representatives of each stakeholder group by considering their mandate, power of influence, overview, experience and knowledge. If you don't have enough information, start contacting the group in order to get insight into who could represent that stakeholder group.

We suggest keeping a record of the stakeholder matrix and the initial list of stakeholders to use for later monitoring purposes. The output of this phase is a substantiated decision to include a set of stakeholders in the interviews.

Guideline for the semi-structured interview

The interviews aim to understand each stakeholder's position in, and perspective on, the context of the Living Lab and their ideas on the challenges for providers of new innovation support services. Below are the guidelines for the **semi-structured interviews** with your stakeholders. Please note that the **questions are there for inspiration**, please adapt and develop the questions and use wording appropriate to your setting.

1. *Introduction:* Introduce yourself and the topic and idea of the Living Labs and explain the aim and procedure of the interview. Ask permission if you want to record the conversation and explain what you will do with the information.
2. *Formal role of the stakeholder:* What is your profession, job, function?
3. *Institutional context:* Are you related to any institution? Which one? What is your position in that institution?
4. *Network* relations and means of communication: Who are your partners or who do you work with? How do you communicate with them?
5. *Perspective on the sustainability challenge:* How would you describe the main challenge in [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? Why is that a challenge? What do you think are the main causes?
6. *Their role in the sustainability challenge:* How are you involved in [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? What do you do on [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]?
7. *Stake and values in the sustainability challenge:* How important is [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB] to you/your organisation? What is your interest? Why is it important? What is at stake for you? What can you gain or lose?
8. *Actual and potential influence on the sustainability challenge:* Do you have an influence on [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? How? Why not? How could you influence [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]?
9. *Ideas for improving the sustainability challenge:* What should be done to improve the situation around [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? What circumstances should change? What practices should change?
10. *Perspective on the role of innovation support in the sustainability challenge and ideas for improvement:* What types of advisory services and innovation support are involved in [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? How does this contribute to the situation? What do you see as the core challenges for providers of innovation support services in [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]? What could contribute further to improving the situation? What additional knowledge and skills do stakeholders need to improve the situation? How would that help? What kind of innovation support could contribute to improve the situation? Do you know examples of this type of innovation support? Where? How does it work?
11. *Interest to participate in Living Lab on sustainability challenge:* We are setting up a Living Lab on developing innovation support/advisory services on [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]. Would you be interested to participate in this Living Lab? Why, or why not?
12. *Other actors that need to be included in the Living Lab:* What other stakeholders are important to include in the Living Lab or to talk to on [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB]?

Analysis of interview responses

1. The answers on these 12 topics can be recorded on Sheet 1 shown below.
2. Make a list of all the stakeholders mentioned by the different stakeholders (question 4). Check whether there are new stakeholders and try to position them in the stakeholder matrix. Do you need to interview one of them before you can proceed?
3. Collect all the different perspectives on the sustainability challenge (question 5). Visualise them on one big sheet.
4. Collect all the challenges for providers of innovation support services as they were mentioned by the different stakeholders. Especially, the insights gained under subject 9. and 10. are input here. Make a long list of challenges for providers of innovation support services on [TOPIC OF LIVING LAB].

Sheet 1. Stakeholder profile

Name stakeholder	
Formal role	
Organisation or company	
Network and communication	**Partner type of contact/communication** … … … …
Perspective on the sustainability challenge	
Stake and values in the topic	
Actual and potential influence on the topic	
Ideas for improvement	
Perspective on the role of innovation support	
Interest to participate in Living Lab	
Suggested other stakeholders to consult	

Facilitation

We drew heavily upon the seven steps to achieve effective facilitation skills, as noted by:

McBrown, J. (2018) *What are facilitation skills and how do you facilitate?* Available at: **https://www.roffeypark.com/learning-and-facilitation/what-are-facilitation-skills-and-how-do-you-facilitate/** (Accessed 09 February 2021).

We also ran a role play activity to help people practise how to manage different types of people in meetings.

Based on the Roffey Park Institute's extensive experience of working with groups and running facilitation skills training programmes, here are seven techniques that can be used as described in the source noted above:

Step one: Set the boundaries

"Always begin by setting the ground rules and objectives, even if these are open ended. Having an outline structure and time for reflection is also helpful although this mustn't constrain the need to respond "in the moment" to the situation and the needs of the group.

Start by helping the group to clarify an outcome that is reasonable to achieve in the time available. Try to reach a consensus on how disagreements or conflicts will be handled and be clear what your own role is in the process. And aim to create an environment of trust, openness and confidentiality.

Once you have established the boundaries, you can keep bringing the group back to these to make sure they remain on track."

Step two: Remain impartial

"When facilitating it can be difficult to remain impartial and not to have a pre-determined outcome that you want the group to reach. That's not facilitation, that's manipulation!

The challenge therefore is to influence the group but not dominate it. This means being able to suppress your ideas/solutions and encourage others to talk. This is harder than it sounds. A facilitator needs to encourage the group to consider ideas, but their role should be one of guiding and not dictating. Try to help the group reach a consensus or decide on a course of action – the group must feel as though they've achieved the outcome for themselves."

Step three: Understand group dynamics

"Pay most of your attention to the process level, which sits below the content and relates to how people feel about taking part. This is key to unlocking the group's potential to achieve its goal because it is where you get into the politics and interaction between group members.

Use your senses, your intuition and your instincts to pick up the atmosphere. Are people enthusiastic? Are people expressing their feelings or keeping quiet? Who's talking and who isn't? Use questions to challenge and clarify, concentrate on the emotional temperature and try to read the body language and any other non-verbal behaviour."

Step four: Use your personal style

"A facilitator's role is more about 'being' – the energy and personality you bring – rather than 'doing' – the techniques you use to help the group.

Who you are – your style and presence – impacts your facilitation skills. To create an open and honest environment, you need an empathic personal presence and the group needs to respect and trust you. They also need to feel confident that you are able to deal with any incidents that may happen.

Remember where you sit, whether you look in control or are flustered, how animated you are – all of which give you a sense of presence, as does your tone of voice."

Step five: Intervene when appropriate

"It's important to continuously notice what's going on, make sense of it and then decide what to do about it. You may choose to keep quiet and watch what happens or you could intervene. A look, smile or nod can be all that is needed to intervene or indicate support or challenge to what is going on." Our Living Lab experience also suggests that there is a time when facilitators need to pass on the role or develop a co-role with another facilitator – perhaps a local leader – or get a monitor to help out.

"Challenging the group can be tricky to handle. You may need to ask difficult questions that are fundamental, or which draw attention to difficult process issues that the group may find uncomfortable. Sometimes the facilitator is there to surface the grit in the oyster or to be the grit themselves."

Step six: Handling difficult situations

"Dealing with difficult people and conflict are two of the biggest challenges to effective facilitation.

With conflict, it is often not the apparent disagreement but an underlying conflict that is the real problem. There are tactics and skills that you can develop to respond to these situations, which are important because success is often determined by how the issue is addressed.

If it is a difficult situation, suggest having a break for coffee, change the scenery, work in pairs or brainstorm the issue involved. If it's a disruptive individual, you may choose to confront that person, perhaps in private, and give them feedback on what they are doing and the impact it is having on the group."

Step seven: Practise, practise, practise

"Remember facilitation is an art and not a science. You're constantly making decisions about what to do in every situation: some you will get right but some you won't. But the skills involved – observation, listening, reading body language, understanding human behaviour and stepping out of the content – can all be achieved through practise. And the more you practise your facilitation skills, the more comfortable you'll become with it."

Peer-to-peer mentoring

This tool was devised by people at WUR who drew upon several open source information on approaches to stimulate dialogue and mentoring between professionals. For AgriLink a short approach with 5 steps and timing of 30 minutes was developed, applied and refined, as also described in a practice abstract on Peer-to-Peer-Mentoring-for-facilitators-of-innovation-groups-and-Living-Labs.

It is always possible to get stuck in your thinking about a situation when you are so close to it. Asking someone else can help, asking someone else facing similar issues may be better, while asking several people may be better still. In AgriLink we benefitted from having six Living Labs, which enabled us to undertake joint learning and deepening our understanding about issues in each of the Living Labs by offering peer-to-peer mentoring and advice. And we did this more than once.

The goals of this activity are to:

- Discuss and reflect on individual cases and bottlenecks in Living Labs with peers
- Provide insights and solutions for new interventions.

We used it to help:

- Discover the problem behind the problem
- Reflect on your own thinking and acting
- Improve professionalism.

The process was simple but very effective especially with diverse fields of expertise around the table. In some meetings we had one group of six Living Labs, in others we formed two groups of three Living Labs. But they all followed the same steps (Figure 1).

1. The facilitator and/or monitor from each Living Lab began by presenting an obstacle or issue regarding progress in their Living Lab to others in the group for 5 minutes.
2. Members of the group then asked open questions (why, how, what, who, when...) to understand the issue better and to make the facilitator and/or monitor see the problem from other perspectives. This lasted for about 10 minutes and it is important that these are open questions that do not give any direct advice on want to do.
3. The facilitator and/or monitor then had up to 5 minutes to reformulate (or not) their obstacle or issue in the light of the questions asked.
4. Next, the other members of the group each gave one piece of advice on how that Living Lab could resolve the obstacle or issue. This took up to 10 minutes.
5. Finally, the facilitator and/or monitor then said which advice they would follow. This took about 5 minutes.

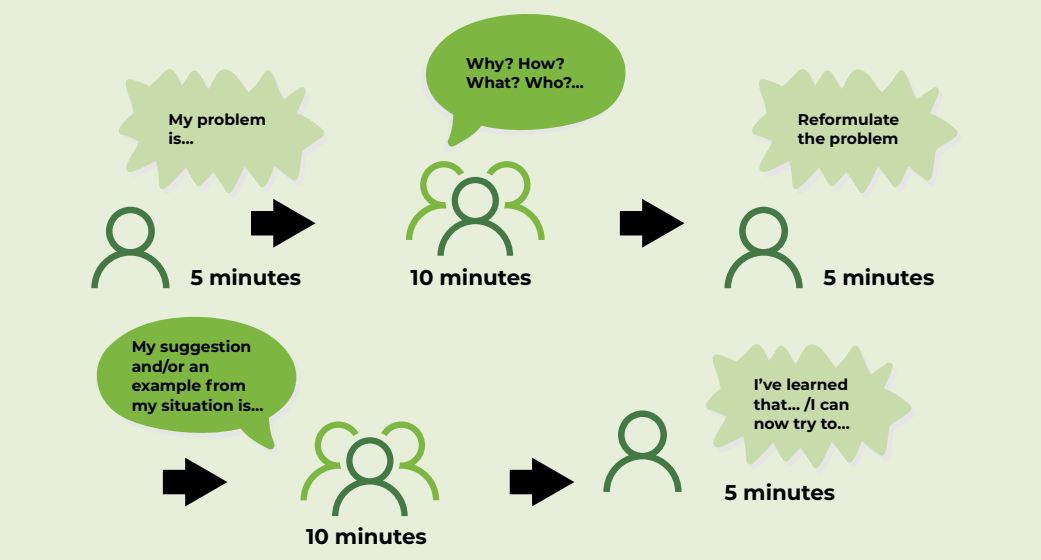


Figure 1 P2P mentoring

Representing your situation with diagrams

Much of this material to do with systems diagramming is taken from existing openly licensed resources on the Open University's OpenLearn website authored by Andy Lane. These include a free **Mastering Systems Thinking in Practice** course and **Systems Thinking: Diagramming Tutorials**.

In order to start our process of co-design and co-creation in running our Living Labs, we asked people to produce a representation of their situation that shows the main elements and issues of the ***context*** of their Living Lab. We suggested that they use ***either*** a spray diagram ***or*** a 'rich picture' for this representation. They could prepare it on a large piece of paper and take a photograph to make a slide or prepare it electronically. When the Living Labs were up and running, we used these diagrams again but also added systems maps and conversation maps as other ways of representing a situation of people's thinking about a situation. In nearly all cases, the diagrams are the product of a group of people rather than an individual. Indeed, some of the greatest value of representing situations in this way is for it to be a participatory process that can reflect the different perspectives of those involved.

Below are some examples that we gave to get them started and, in case these techniques were new to them, there are links to a few guidelines to follow. (Many of these diagrams have been 're-drawn' for presentation, we don't expect any diagram to be a work of art, just representations of rich situations!)

Spray diagrams

The purpose of spray diagrams

Tony Buzan originally developed spray diagrams in 1974 together with mind maps, which look similar (Buzan, 1974). Spray diagrams are a simple, fast technique for extracting the important ideas from a situation, conversation, presentation or written article, and getting them down on paper in a way that is meaningful to you. A spray diagram starts from a theme in the centre and the ideas arrange around that theme showing the connections or associations between the ideas. Sometimes it is useful to introduce a small number of sub-themes into which your subsequent ideas group:

Elements

- a title describing the purpose of the diagram
- central circle for the main theme or topic
- blobs (not perfect circles) for sub-themes or sub-topics (optional)
- branching sets of lines
- words on the lines or at the ends of the lines describing the various ideas you wish to incorporate.

Conventions

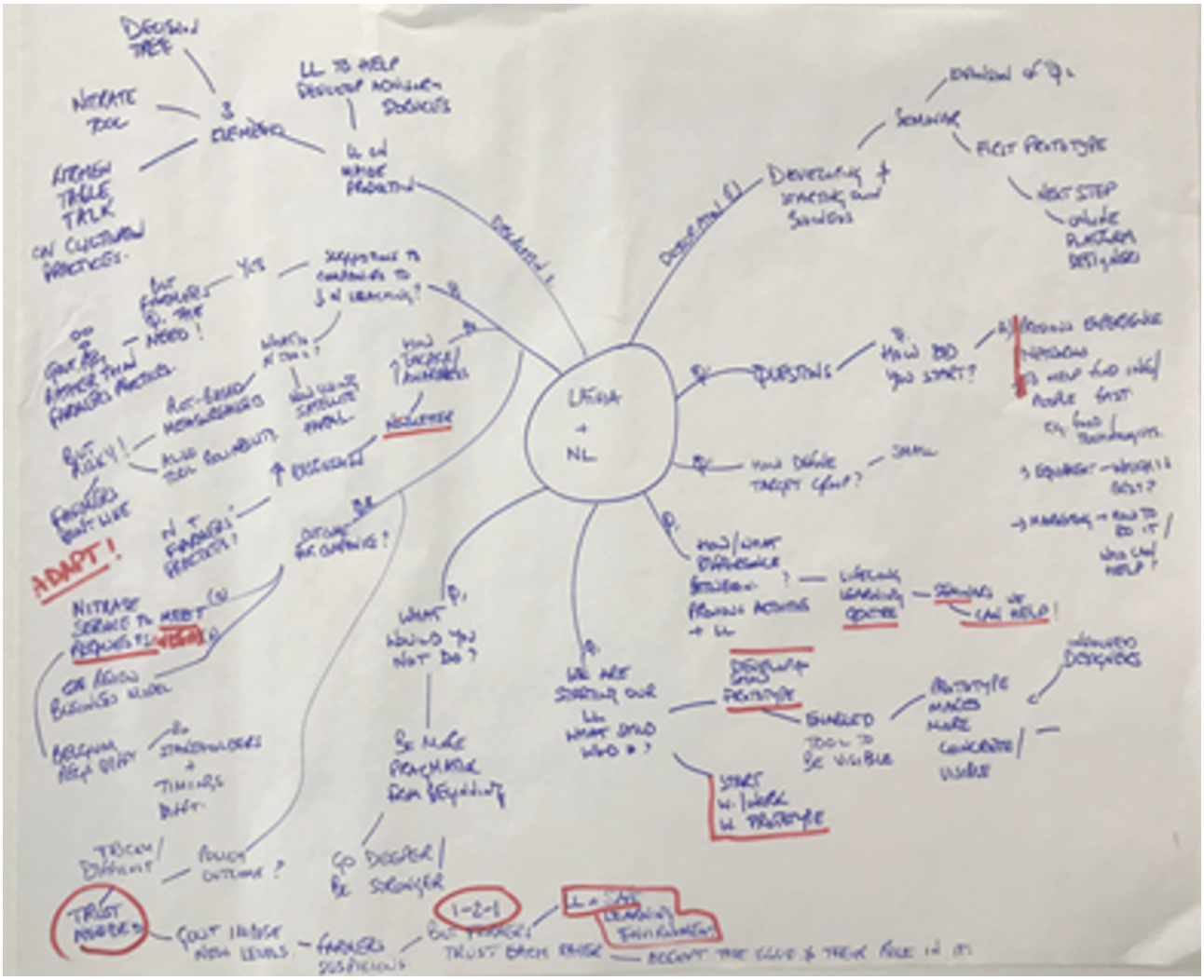
- Put the main theme or topic as a keyword or phrase in a central circle.
- Related ideas expressed in one or a few words are attached to lines radiating from this circle (or optionally from the sub-themes or sub-topics creating fans).
- Write words along the lines or ends of lines.
- The lines do not show directional links, just an association.
- Use different colours to highlight particular fans.
- Similar ideas on different fans can be linked by loops but be careful not to confuse the diagram or make it too messy.

Guidelines

- Write down the central idea leaving space all around it.
- Identify branches from that idea that you want to explore further. Write them down around the central idea and link each to it with a straight line. Keep going by considering each branch to see if further branches (ideas) link to it.
- Start by working freely and then review the diagram to see whether the particular arrangement meets with your objective.
- If you are stuck or lose the thread, start again with a new central theme and create a new, perhaps subsidiary, diagram. Don't clutter up the original. You could perhaps just leave things for a while to give you time for some fresh thinking.

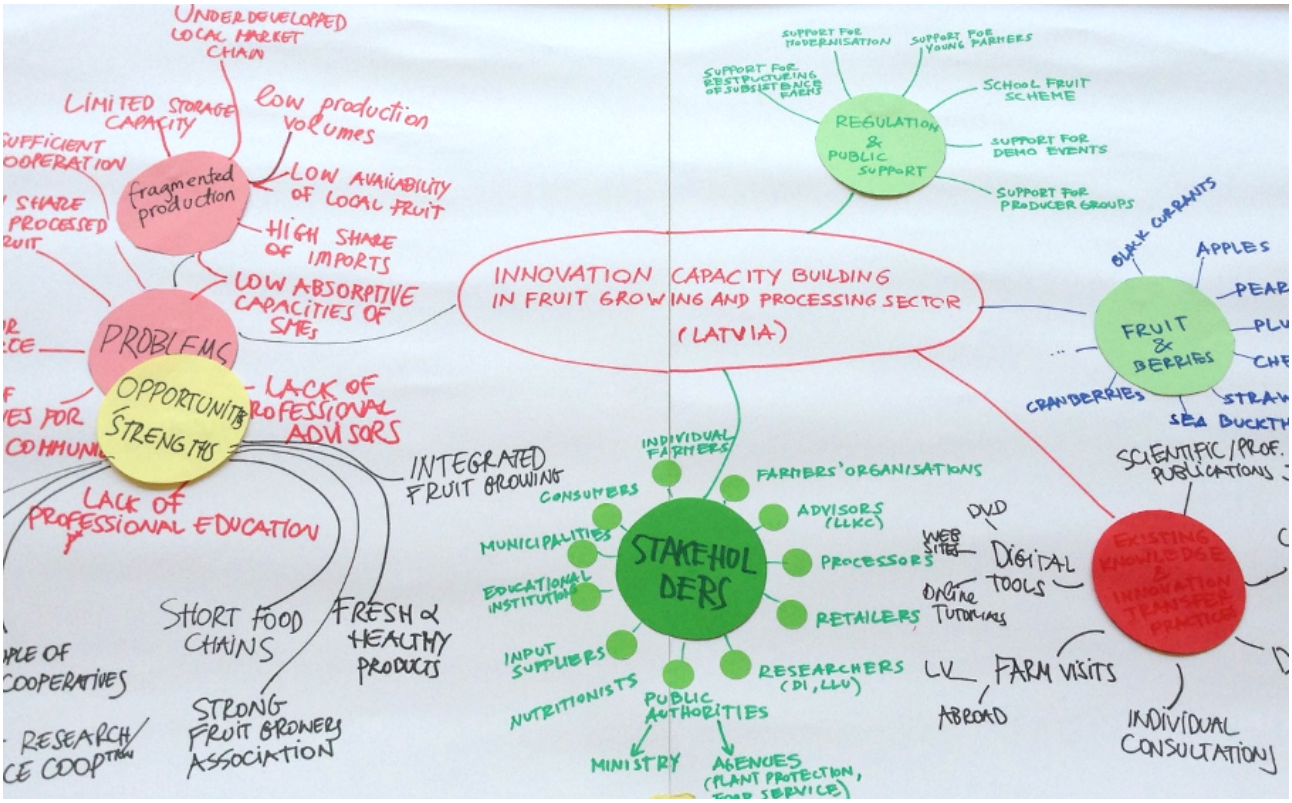
Examples

This first spray diagram was drawn to represent the situation within the Netherlands/Belgium Living Lab where they were trying to determine how to do their prototyping within the design thinking framework.



(Photographer/source: Chris Blackmore)

This second (extract from a) spray diagram was created at the start of the AgriLink project to help summarise the situation facing the Latvian Living Lab.



(Photographer/source: Chris Blackmore)

Systems maps

The purpose of systems maps

Systems maps help you to begin to decide how you are going to structure a situation and to communicate to others the system you have chosen to study. They are helpful in highlighting different ways of approaching a situation. Thus, systems maps are used to:

- clarify thoughts at an early stage of analysis
- decide upon structural elements for a more detailed diagram
- experiment with different boundaries and different understandings of the purpose of the system
- decide upon the level of your system of interest ('focusing')
- communicate to others the basic structure and purpose of the system you are describing.

Elements

- a title of your diagram, specifying the system of interest is essential
- a system boundary
- system components represented by blob lines, and described in words or short phrases within the boundary
- environmental components described in words or short phrases as blobs outside the boundary
- note linking lines, arrows, etc. are not normally permitted elements.

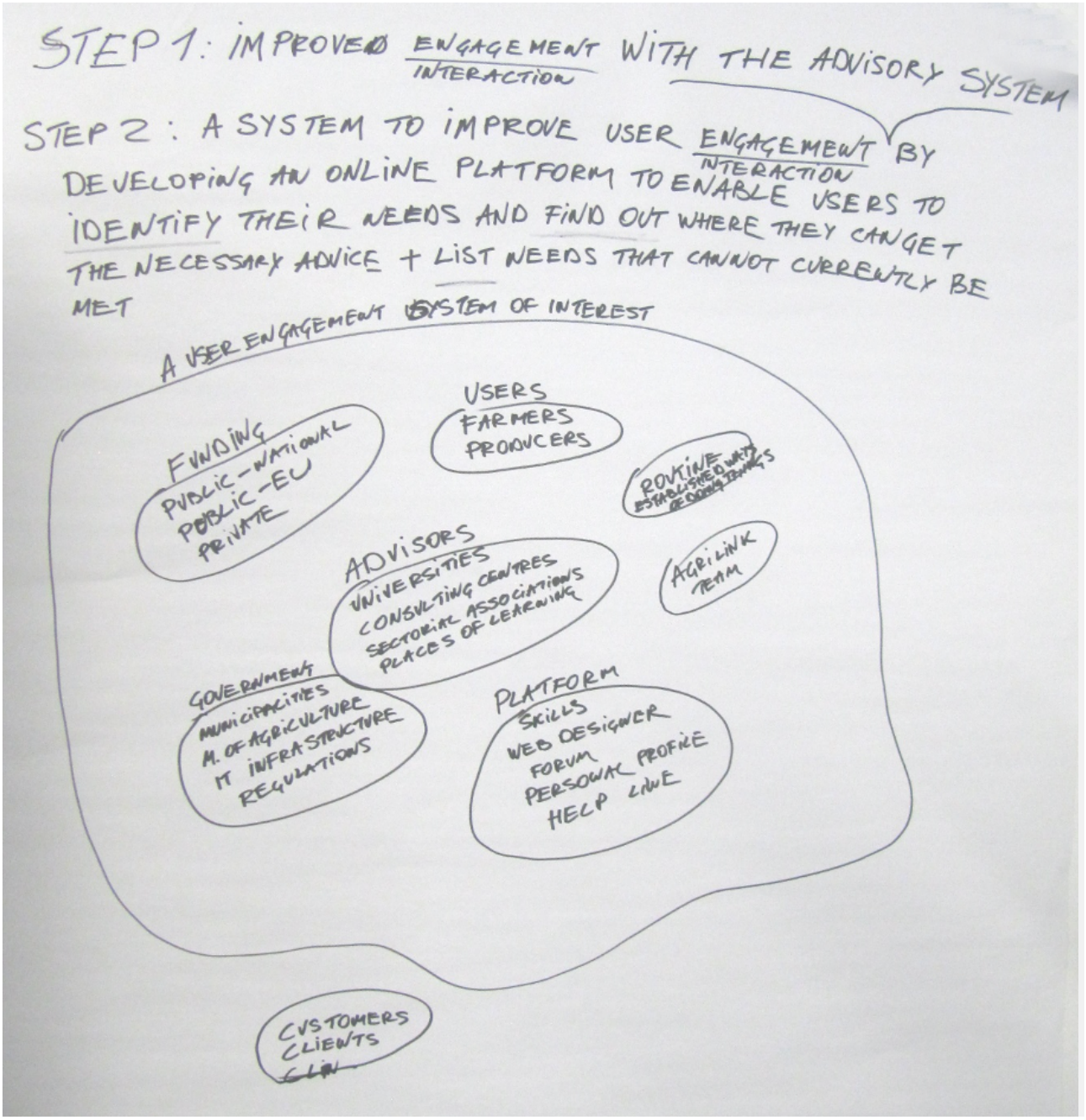
Conventions

- Words are used to name each component of the system and the environment.
- Blobs may overlap only if some components (which need not be depicted) are seen as common to both in the early stages of exploring your system of interest.

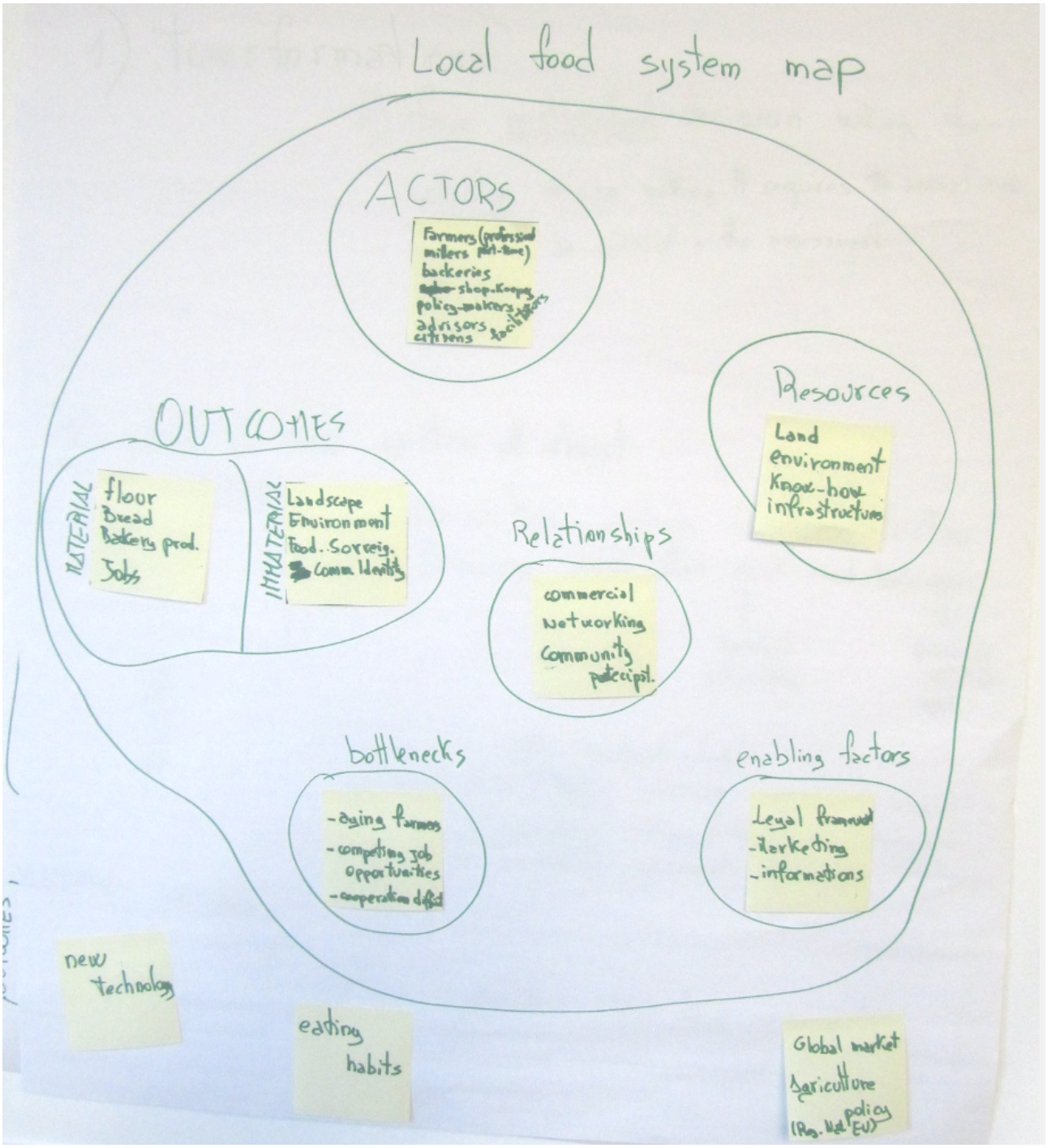
Guidelines

- The title of the diagram usually refers to what the system is for – what its purpose is. The basic form is 'A system to …'. If you are having trouble thinking about purpose, focus on what the output of the system is. Your system boundary should be clear. The system boundary can be emphasised by colour. You can only define a system by 'drawing' a boundary that distinguishes what you 'observe' as inside, and what you observe as outside. Hence, you cannot think of a system without thinking of its 'boundary' and its environment.
- Inside the boundary are all those components of the system. The boundary is a notional line, a subjective idea, that doesn't have to correspond to any real-life barrier, for example the limits of an organisation.
- The environment of a system is made up of those things that are not part of the system but can affect the system or be affected by the system.
- Irregular blobs are normally preferable to regular boxes or perfect circles.
- Aim for consistency between components.
- Although there are no firm rules on positioning of components, it makes sense to put important components in a fairly central position and to place related components close together.
- It is a good idea to leave some space within your map. Not only does this allow components to stand out clearly, but it leaves room for any components you may wish to add later.
- As with many diagram types, drawing several versions of a systems map can be very useful. In the case of a systems map, this can be used to compare different ideas of what a system is or what it is for. Different purposes often imply different boundaries between the system and its environment and can have implications for how the structure can be portrayed.

Examples from Agrilink Living Labs



(Photographer/source: Andy Lane)



(Photographer/source: Andy Lane)

Rich pictures

The purpose of rich pictures

Rich pictures were originally developed as part of Peter Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981; Checkland and Scholes, 1990). Their purpose is to gather in one place, on one sheet of paper, all the data about a complex messy situation that you have collected. Using pictures or drawings is helpful in being able to collect it all together on one piece of paper, so that you can see everything together. Using pictures or drawings to think about issues is common to several problem-solving or creative-thinking methods (including therapy). Drawings can both evoke and record insight into a situation.

Draw a rich picture before you have a clear understanding of the situation you are interested in and use it as a jumping off point for developing understanding.

Rich pictures are situation summaries. They are an attempt to encapsulate the real situation through a no-holds-barred, cartoon representation of things that you perceive in the situation, objects, layout, connections, relationships, influences, cause and effect, structures, processes, issues, arguments, and so on. They should also, as far as possible, depict subjective elements such as character and characteristics, the different points of view, prejudices, and spirit of those involved. Remember particularly that the picture you construct is your picture, constructed from your perspective on the situation from the data that you have been able to collect. Inevitably, in a complex situation, you will not have been able to collect data from all those involved.

Elements

- A title describing the purpose of the diagram.
- Pictorial symbols (cartoons) representing things in the complex messy situation. These can be cartoon representations, sketches, or symbols (e.g. crossed swords representing an argument).
- Keywords or phrases (e.g. speech bubble to convey attitude).

Conventions

To help interpret a situation, choose symbols, scenes or images that represent the situation. Use as many colours as necessary and draw the symbols on a large piece of paper. Try not to get too carried away with the fun and challenge to your ingenuity in finding pictorial symbols.

Put in whatever connections you see between your pictorial symbols – avoid producing merely an unconnected set. Places where connections are lacking may later prove significant but beware of trying to make the whole picture a coherent entity. A mess by its very nature is not a coherent entity.

Avoid too much writing, either as commentary or as 'word bubbles' coming from people's mouths, although some will help explain the diagram to other people.

Guidelines

A rich picture is an attempt to assemble everything that might be relevant to a complex situation. You should somehow represent every observation that occurs to you or that you gleaned from your initial exploration.

Fall back on words only where ideas fail you for a sketch that encapsulates your meaning.

You should not seek to impose any style or structure on your picture. Place everything on your sheet wherever your instinct prompts. At a later stage, you may find that the placement itself was significant.

If you 'don't know where to begin', then the following sequence may help to get you started:

1. First look for the structures in the situation – these are the parts of the situation that change relatively slowly over time and are relatively stable (i.e. the people, the set-ups, the command hierarchy).
2. Next, look for processes within the situation – the activities that are going on, and the things that are in a state of change.
3. Then look for the ways in which the structure and the processes relate to each other. Doing this will give you an idea of the climate of the situation.

At this stage, avoid thinking in system terms – using ideas like 'Well, the situation is made up of a marketing system and a production system and a quality control system'. The word 'system' implies organised interconnections. However, it may be precisely the absence of such organised interconnectedness that lies at the heart of any problem, so by assuming its existence you may be missing the point.

Seek challenges to your initial assessment of the situation. Avoid being channelled down any particular line of thought as far as possible in your collection of data and drawing. Often people start with the presumption that what is required is to search for ways of making these systems more efficient..

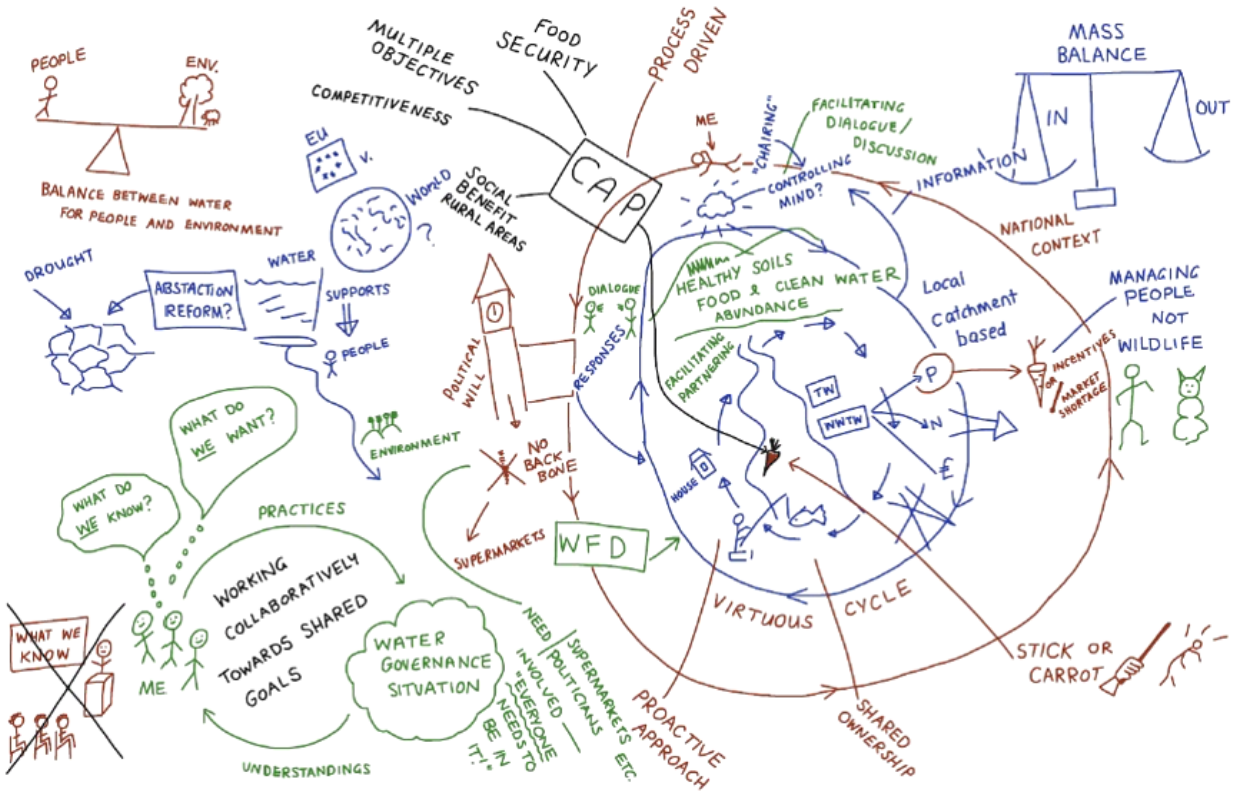
Make sure that your picture includes not only the factual data about the situation, but also the subjective information.

Look at the social roles of those within the situation, and at the kinds of behaviour expected from people in those roles. If you see any conflicts, indicate them.

Finally, include yourself in the picture. Make sure that your roles and relationships in the situation are clear. Remember that you are not an objective observer, but someone with a set of values, beliefs and norms that colour your perceptions.

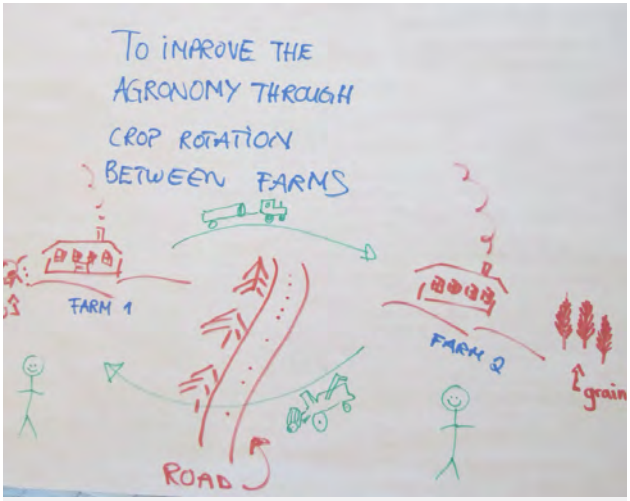
Examples

This first example of a rich picture was drawn in a workshop on water governance in the UK but was subsequently redrawn for clarity:



Source: Foster et al, 2015

This is very detailed, so here are photographs of two simpler examples from the AgriLink Living Labs:



(Photographer/source: Andy Lane)

References

Foster, N., Collins, K., Blackmore, C. and Ison, R. (2015) *Water governance in England: Improving understandings and practices through systemic co-inquiry*, Workshop report, Milton Keynes: The Open University. Available at: **https://mcs.open.ac.uk/cadwago/full_report.pdf (Accessed 9 February 2021)**.

Conversation mapping

A conversation map is a map of a conversation between 4–9 people, albeit there are 'rules' on what to do and what not to do.

The purpose of conversation mapping

The purpose of conversation mapping is about:

- Offering and appreciating different perspectives on a situation
- Learning about others' and our own understanding of the situation
- Gaining insights about the situation emerging from the conversation
- Networking and benchmarking
- Capturing the above in the development of the conversation map.

Elements

The main elements are:

- central circle for the main theme
- phrases (can be in blobs) for sub-themes
- lines connecting blobs.

How to use them

First you need a large sheet of paper and several different coloured pens. The paper could be stuck on a wall or laid on a table, as long as everyone can see and be able to write on it. Preferably everyone needs to be standing rather than sitting during the mapping process, but it may not be possible for some participants to stand at all or for a long period and, therefore, adjustments may need to be made.

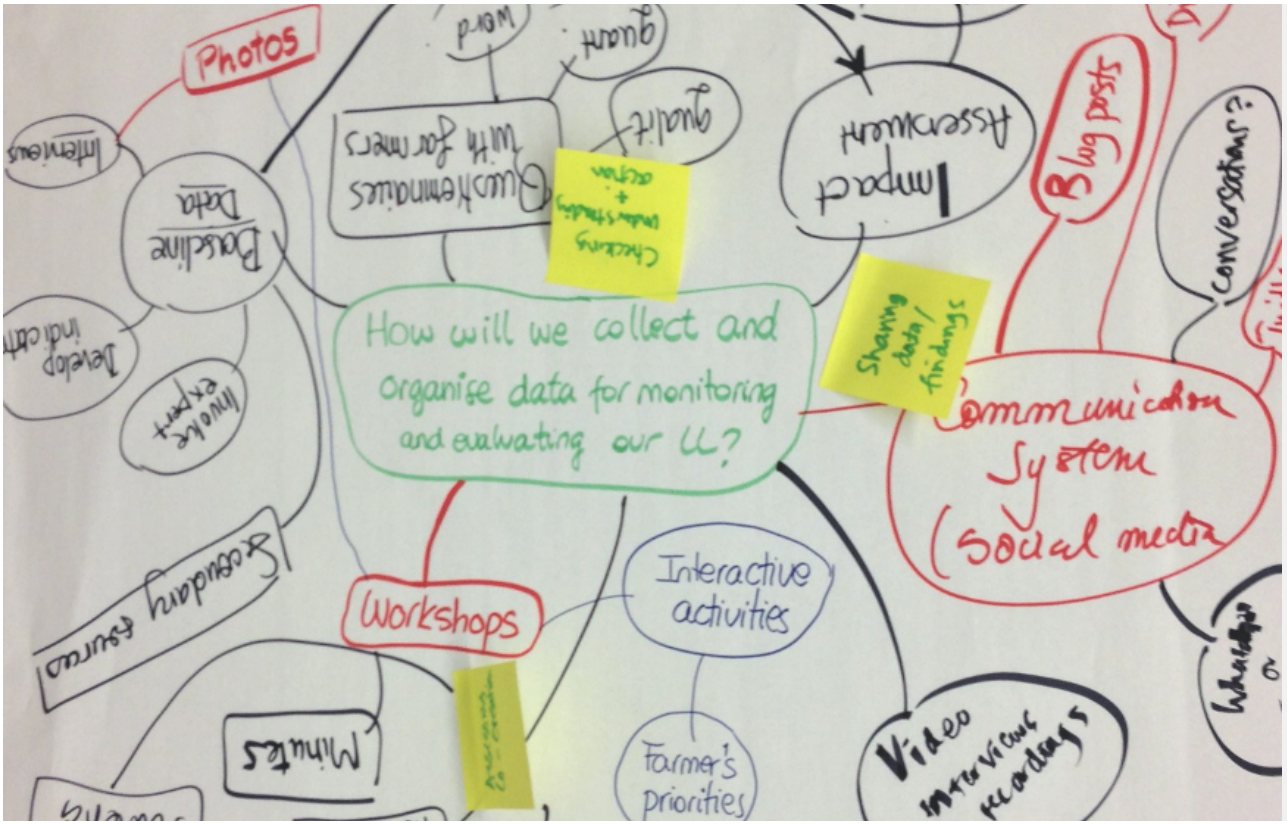
Conversation maps need a starting point, an agreed topic of conversation about a situation you are facing – the conversation "trigger". When such a trigger has been agreed (try not to have the conversation while trying to agree on the starting

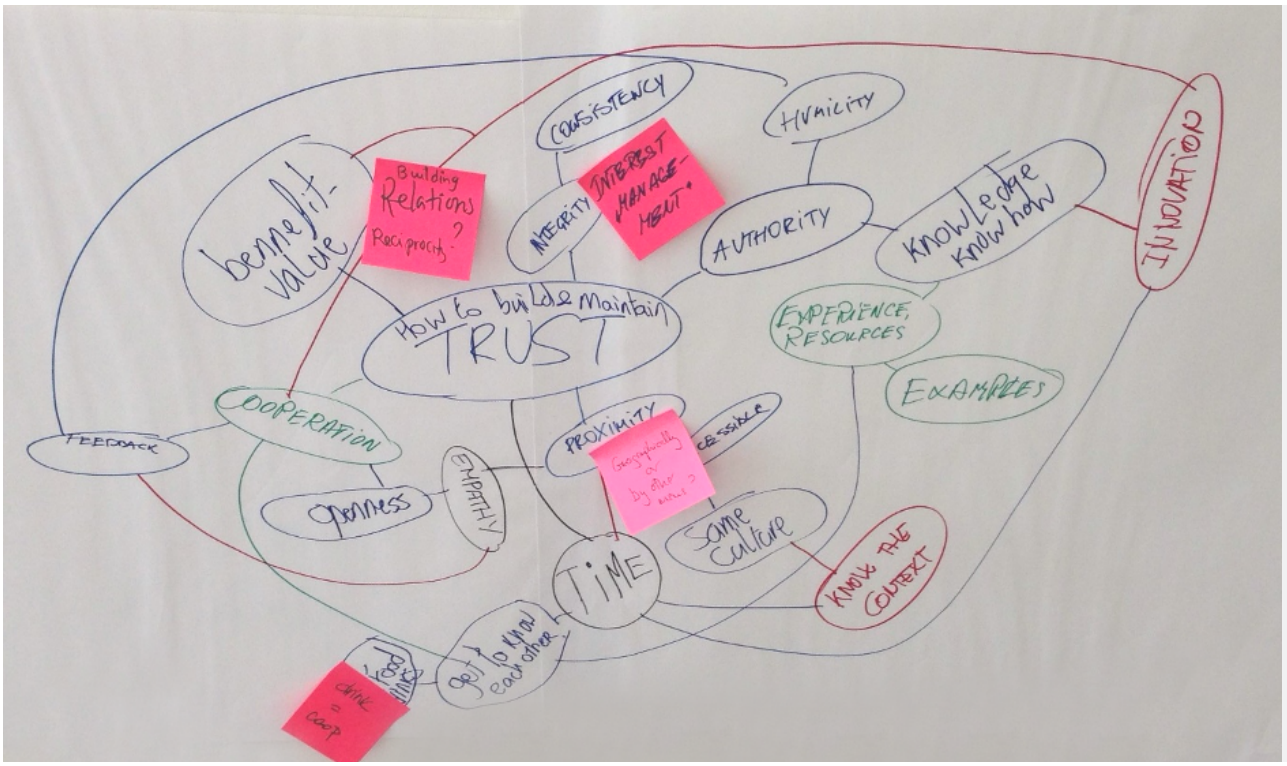
Each person has a different coloured pen to use, which helps identify whether there has been a balanced set of contributions (again some participants may not be able to use a pen in which case they need to have someone not in the conversation writing from them on their instruction). The conversation can then begin.

In the conversation:

- One person starts by recording their view about an aspect of the central 'trigger'.
- Another person describes their response and writes their views relating to this, linked by a single line branching out.
- Keep going until the theme is explored fully.
- Begin a new theme with a new branch from the trigger.

Here are two examples from Agrilink workshops where we were looking at how to do monitoring ad evaluation of the Living LBS and how to engage stakeholders.





(Photographer/source: Chris Blackmore)

Avoid doing the following...

Process:

- Having only one person who is writing
- No-one listening/side conversations
- Talking and not writing
- Writing in biro/small text
- Being out of the conversation
- Sitting down (though note accessibility requirements).

Content:

- Joining up ideas across themes
- Forcing a pattern on the map or ideas
- Jumping to obvious conclusions
- Being constrained by the edges (use more paper!).

Role Play

This version was based on a role play and training session developed for an EU-H2020 project DiverIMPACTS titled Marvellous meetings and inspiring interviews by Wageningen Research and Amsterdam University.

This exercise was used to help facilitators and monitors to practise preparing for and facilitating a meeting with stakeholders. In this case, two people took on the role of preparing and running the meeting, while the other people choose a character to play from the list below.

Information to prepare the meeting (2 persons)

Role: You are **preparing and leading** the meeting.

What are the **relevant roles** for you both: Chair; recorder; facilitator; timekeeper; free role.

Meeting topic: Decide on a way to interact as AgriLink Living Labs with other Living Labs in Europe.

The advisory board of AgriLink is of the opinion that there should be more interactions between the Living Labs in Agrilink with other Living Labs in Europe. You are asked to develop ways how to do this.

Time: You have 15 minutes for the meeting! So, keep things rolling.

Elements: 1. Get ideas out of the group. 2. Design/combine and decide on best idea. 3. Find an owner for the implementation of the idea.

Condition: Use at least one interactive method.

Information about the characters for the others

Each character can be printed on an individual page, with participants being given or choosing a character to play.

Monopoliser

The Monopoliser thinks he or she is the only one with wisdom on various subjects at the meeting. The Monopoliser believes everyone else is there to hear him or her speak. They don't appreciate meetings that offers opportunities to hear from many. They prattle on and on, arrogantly acting as though their ideas or beliefs are more important than those of others. Sadly, other people shy away from contributing, intimidated by the Monopoliser's strangle hold on the meeting.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: 'Interaction in EU projects has in your view a very strong political context: explain to the others that the idea of the European Union is to exchange across countries and cultures, on the basis of equality. It would be very inappropriate to suggest that Southern and Eastern countries mainly could learn from North-western European countries. Brexit was one of worst things that could happen to Europe. You can continue for hours to explain the ideals of a United Europe. During the meeting, you will advocate for as much interaction as possible. The more, the better.'

When facilitators allow an employee to monopolize a meeting, it sends the message that their rudeness is sanctioned. The facilitator, or even other meeting participants, should indicate an interest in hearing from others in the meeting, to remind the Monopoliser that others can speak as well as listen – including the monopoliser.

Tangent Talker

The Tangent Talker hijacks the topic of the group by taking discussions to topics unrelated to the issue at hand. One minute he or she is on topic and the next minute he or she has brought in a topic from their agenda that shifts the discussion.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: One time in the group, just start talking about something other than the subject. It can be what you did yesterday or some other day. Do it a second time later on in the exercise if time allows.

GOAL: Throw out at least two subjects in the middle of other conversations and then shift the subject to another before closure is reached on the subject you brought up.

GOAL: 'You have a clear idea on the interaction across Living Labs: you want to visit a Living Lab in Finland with partners from two AgriLink Labs. Ask the leader of the meeting to organise that for you. The other proposals are not relevant for you.'

Your meeting leader's ability to recognize the tangent and refocus is essential to a productive meeting. "Let's remember to confine ourselves to the topic at hand" is a good way to get back on track. Alternately saying, "let's try to avoid tangents", also labels such behaviour as contrary to the group's aims. As well, you can "park" extraneous items in a "parking lot" list where they're noted, if only to be addressed later.

Devil's Advocate

Let's face it, there's a Devil's Advocate in every crowd and in most meetings, too. This person seems to enjoy taking the opposite track. Whatever the argument being put forth, this person delights in taking an opposing view. It's sport for them, an exercise in opposition. The more unpopular their position is, the more exciting they find the challenge. Often this participant begins by saying "just for the sake of argument – I believe the opposite is true." While there is value in looking at issues from multiple points of view and to avoid 'group think', the Devil's Advocate applies their technique to every issue, every argument and every conversation.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: Your role is to judge the statements of members in the role play in a sceptical and critical manner. Point out at least three faults by the end of the role play.

GOAL: 'For you and your cluster, interaction should be organised during the Annual meetings. You don't think it's feasible to participate in other activities across clusters.'

Hold on to your agenda and get comfortable. This could take a while. A good meeting leader can praise this person's ability to raise alternative issues. At the same time, the meeting leader must indicate its inappropriateness, given time parameters or previously agreed upon issues.

Cynic

The ultimate naysayer, the Cynic has a Masters degree in negativity. Clever at using the phrase, "it won't work," they are skilled at deflating and defeating whatever motion is in motion. "Can't be done." "They'll never buy it." "We tried it once and it was a failure." Their motto: just say no.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: You're going to doubt if it is a real problem. There is enough interaction and a structure for it is unnecessary.

GOAL: 'You will block every proposal, unless extra budget is provided.'

Challenge cynical employees to think like the Devil's Advocate; suppose for a minute that the idea or project could work. Use a common conflict resolution tool and ask the Cynic to embrace the other side's point of view as if it were their own and argue that side's position.

Fence Sitter

Known for their paralysis by analysis, Fence Sitters are unable to make decisions. Despite being in a group, they are conflicted by multiple arguments, and can't "pull the trigger" when it's time to make a decision in a meeting. They provide fodder for the Devil's Advocate, the Cynic, and other characters with their ambivalence. Whether they are afraid of being wrong, or of disagreeing with someone else, or just going on record, they are a meeting monster for their inability to move the action forward.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: You going to delay the group making a decision.

GOAL: Your role is to provide an intellectual framework to the group. You should state and expound on two well-known facts or theories before the end of the role play.

GOAL: 'You are not sure why we should organise more interaction between Labs. For every proposal, you will be able to mention some pro's and con's, but you doubt if we can decide.'

Try to flatter the Fence Sitter into action. Remind them that they have a vote and were invited to use it. Ask them their opinions on matters to draw them out and get them on record.

Joker

Don't let the Joker's good nature fool you, Jokers can be meeting monsters. Their constant joking has the effect of diminishing others' serious ideas or suggestions. Their humour can reduce others' motions and makes it difficult for some to be taken seriously. There is a time and place for joking. While we all like a good laugh, constant joking disrupts a meeting and distracts attention from where it should be.

Goals to choose from: Note the role play will only take 15 minutes!

GOAL: Talk after someone else talks and do this five times. Pick up some word the previous talker said and make some funny comment about it.

GOAL: : 'For you, interaction is mostly about good food and drinks; meeting locations always remind you about funny holiday stories. Your jokes should not distract the decision making too much; choose one of the proposals to support.'

A meeting leader can designate several minutes at the start or middle of a business meeting specifically for humour. When it crops up elsewhere and is deemed disruptive, the leader can remind people that the time for humour is passed or forthcoming, so as to control it.

Optional extra role: Robots (fitting Fence Sitter, Cynic, Joker, Tangent Talker)

These meeting monsters are actually cell/mobile phones, pagers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), tablets and laptop computers. Each distracts their owner and others, too, as they intrude upon participants' attention spans during meetings.

A good meeting leader will create ground rules or norms for meetings, including turning off these gadgets at their outset. It's hard to compete with human distractions, let alone electronic ones as well.

Acknowledgements

This AgriLink Living Lab Toolbox was put together by Andy Lane from The Open University in the United Kingdom but has drawn upon the work and writings of many colleagues in the AgriLink consortium:

Chris Blackmore, The Open University

Hanne Leirs, Innovatiesteunpunt

Herman Schoorlemmer, Stichting Dienst Landbouwkundig Onderzoek

Melanie von Raaj, Innovatiesteunpunt

This AgriLink Living Lab Toolbox is a deliverable from one part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727577.