Systems Mapping Terms

COMMUNICATIONS & NETWORK PLAN: A defined approach to connecting with people and organizations to foster collaborations, coalitions, and partnerships that align and advance action across a system.

COMPLEXITY: A situation that defies predictability and makes linear planning and replicating successes difficult. Often found in contexts where the complex interrelationships of many factors and the dynamics between these factors and their wider environment make it necessary to understand not just individual elements, but the larger system itself.

CORE STORY: The overarching narrative that responds to the framing question for a system map. The most powerful dynamics driving the system.

DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP: The causal connection between two factors, demarcated by an arrow. Arrows are accompanied with “+/-” demarcations, which indicate the direction of change as the first factor affects the second. For example, “A+ → B-” will be read as “As Factor A increases, Factor B decreases.”

FACTOR: A node on a system map that represents a quality or condition in a system that is increasing or decreasing as part of a feedback loop.

FRAMING QUESTION: A guiding question that is used to focus and bound the analysis of a system in order to enhance an organization’s ability to positively affect that system.

LEARNING AGENDA: A plan to better understand a system and strengthen change strategies over time. A learning agenda contains research questions to expand knowledge of the system, as well as questions aimed at monitoring our impacts on the system, reflected through the indicators of progress of the results framework.

LEVERAGE: The ability of interventions in a system to have disproportionately large impacts. Leverage opportunities are made up of a collection of related factors, connections, and dynamics that together can impact the equilibrium of a system.

LOOPS: The representation of cause-and-effect within a system captured as a complete feedback cycle. Loops can be vicious (leading to ever worsening outcomes), virtuous (improving outcomes over time), stagnating (keeping things from getting better), or stabilizing (keeping things from getting worse).

REGIONS: Clusters of loops organized around major themes within a system map.

RESULTS FRAMEWORK: A set of measurable indicators designed to track whether progress is being made in changing a system. A results framework is central to a learning agenda and underpins monitoring and evaluation plans.

STAKEHOLDER: An individual or organization that seeks to influence, and/or is influenced by, the dynamics of a given system.

STRATEGY: A plan for the set of activities that aims to shift dynamics within a system to produce positive change. Activities might include grants, advocacy, research, partnerships, communications, and other approaches.

SYSTEM: A diverse set of parts that interact with each other and their environment in ways that are dynamic and often hard to predict – and that can be studied, mapped, and influenced. In systems mapping, the boundaries of a system are shaped by a framing question.

SYSTEMS MAP: A visual representation of a collection of patterns of behavior in the form of causal loops that are interconnected and illustrate why a system currently operates as it does. The systems map represents the most significant dynamics driving a system. While no map is ever considered “finished” (because a system is constantly evolving and any group’s understanding of a system is always partial), a systems map represents our best understanding of a system as it currently functions.