Assignment: Map Your System

Mapping the system around your chosen challenge will help test your assumptions, dig into the complexity of the drivers of the challenge, and explore feedback loops that keep the system in place. We'll start with a cluster (brain-dump) map. Don't worry about right or wrong answers; the aim is to start to see the interconnections and relationships in your system. The messier, the better!

1. **Set up:** Grab a large piece of paper (ideally, poster-size) and colored markers. For virtual sessions, you can use a virtual tool such as Kumu or Miro. Make sure that everyone on your team can see and edit the map so you're truly creating it together, rather than one person writing. You won't be doing research for the first few steps, so put away any distractions, like your phone or laptop.

2. **Add your topic** to the center of the map. You can use your framing from the "Choose Your Challenge" assignment, or put a question in the center.

3. **Add 'nodes'**, or elements of the system, around the topic. These can be any components of the system: actors, stakeholders, factors, ideas, etc. Remember: there's no wrong answer, just get ideas out on the page. You can always draw a more refined version of the map later.

4. **Add connections** between the nodes that reflect dynamics between them. This is where a more complex and subtle view of your system will start to come out. Things will start to feel messy - that's good! Suspend the 'solve' it for now or impose order, and just embrace the messiness of the system. Keep going until you have filled your page and it's a complete mess.

5. **Identify feedback loops** (causal loops) that you see in your map. What are some key areas of interconnection?

6. **Reflect.** Take a break from drawing and discuss as a team: what surprised you? Which parts of the map are you most drawn to, or excited about? Why do you think previous efforts have failed to make a difference? How do you think the relationships in the map will change over the next 10 years, and what new problems might arise? Which parts of the map do you feel least certain about -- and what research can you do to understand them better (who should you speak with)?

7. As a team, **short-list 3-5 intervention points** where your team thinks you might be able to impact the system. Frame a first hypothesis around what an intervention could do at this point. What type of Leverage Point is it in Meadows' framework?

Tips: If you need more guidance in how to do this, explore these resources:

● Draw inspiration from these maps: Food System Map, Saving Water for Nature Map

● This series inspired this assignment and has more detailed instructions: Tools for Systems Thinkers

● Xynteo's Systems Mapping Guide is a more advanced step-by-step guide.

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