Unpacking Resilience and Understanding Complexity

Soft Systems Methodology Workshop, Thursday 12th June 2014
Rural People; Resilient Futures Project

Associated reference: presentation slides (see attached)

Workshop purpose: to co-benefit the stakeholders of the Rural People; Resilient Futures project in sharing soft systems methodology training to navigate complexity.

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Introduction

Complex, messy situations can often be intimidating and difficult to navigate. There are methodologies to assist in breaking down these situations or issues into manageable pieces. One such is **Soft Systems Methodology** (SSM) or associated **Participatory Rural Appraisal** (PRA). This handbook contains the activities that were outlined in a workshop held on the 12th of June, 2014, purposed to build the capacity of attendees to deal with complex situations, particularly in the light of rural resilience and vulnerability. The activities contained within were actioned by the facilitators interpretations and can be interpreted a number of ways.

For additional reading and resources on Soft Systems Methodology, the following resources may be useful.

"Growing wings on the way: Systems thinking for messy situations" **Rosalind Armson** (2011) http://www.triarchypress.net/growing-wings.html

http://www.triarchypress.net/uploads/1/4/0/0/14002490/systems_thinking_and_messy_situations.pdf

Peter Checkland:
https://devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au/public_policy_community/content/doc/2010_Checkland_Soft_systems_methodology.pdf

Associated genres and methodologies are **systems thinking** and **social learning processes**, if you are interested in some useful research!

There are multiple resources available to learn more about SSM, PRA and associated methodologies, but the best way to learn is to do!

The workshop commenced with following diagram. The purpose of the day was framed as transitioning from the 'unknown unknowns', to the 'unknown knowns'.
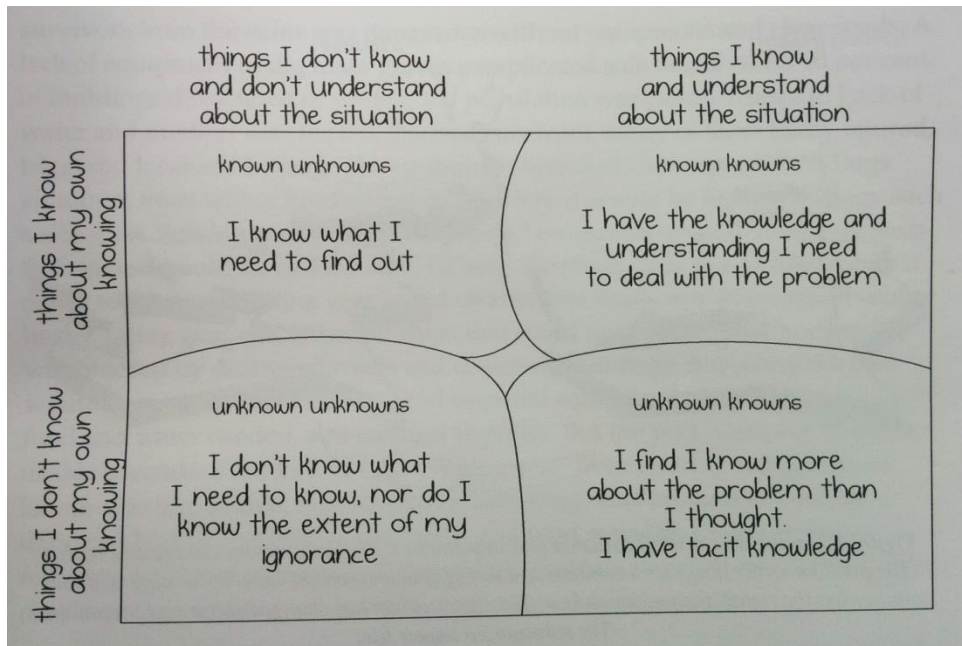
Activities

Ice Breaker: Mapping

Use on the day: At the start of the day, before any introductions.

Purpose: An ice-breaking, introductory exercise to get participants active and to introduce people in the group. A nice alternative to the date you were born ice-breaker.

Create your reference point using a known location, e.g. Hamilton, and ask participants to place themselves around the room, or along a line in respect to that point. Questions to ask are;

- Place yourself where you were born
- Place yourself where you live

Once in place, ask participants to name themselves, their organisation and where they were born.

If you have more time, you can ask participants to make moves across the 'map' from where they were born, where they lived growing up, where they work now etc.

Bracketing

Use on the day: To state the expectations and assumptions for the day.

Purpose: To facilitate disclosing assumptions and expectations at the commencement of documenting a social learning process or navigating a complex problem.

Everyone brings their own experience and history to a situation, and that affects how we treat the situation and what we learn. It is useful to disclose your assumptions and expectations, built on your own 'baggage' at the start of the process. This not only 'puts aside' your assumptions and expectations, but facilitates a 'sharing space' with your co-workers or team on a project. In participating in this exercise, you are actively sharing your expectations and assumptions, and acknowledging that you will put them aside. It is useful to then note with your group that this then allows room for thinking and an open mind.

Ask your group to think about what their 'expectations and assumptions' are for a project, situation or even the workshop or meeting you are in. Get your group to think about this for 5 minutes and note their points down. Then allow each person to share one with the group. Often starting with yourself helps, and allow self-nomination to build trust.

Rich Pictures

Use on the day: In response to the question 'How do you or your organisation interact with the most pressing issues currently facing rural communities in your region?'

Purpose: To get participants to think differently about a situation from their perspective and allow a different format to share their perspective.

Rich Picturing allows participants to work in a format that is outside their comfort zone and often pushes the boundaries. Participants are asked to think about a situation or problem that they are facing, then draw it on butchers paper. It is nice to have a host of coloured textas for participants to use.

Instruct your group to draw themselves in a picture and respond to the question you give them. Note to your group that there are no rules except:

- Draw yourself in the picture
- Do not talk
- Do not use words

Often people resist and say they can't draw. It is often helpful to start by drawing themselves as a stick figure in the middle of the page, and that it isn't an art competition.

Allow 15-20 minutes in silence for your group to draw their rich picture. Do not interrupt them and sometimes it is helpful to leave the room. Alternatively you can ask your group to find a quiet space to draw their rich picture.

Once re-grouped, allow people to take turns to explain their picture. This should take 1-2 minutes and they should not be interrupted. If you have time, it is often useful to ask the person explaining their picture a few pointed questions about aspects of their picture, such as:

- What does this aspect of your picture represent?
- Why have you placed yourself here?

As a data recording exercise it is often useful to audio record the responses as it is difficult to take notes and interact with the participant directly. It is important to note how the participant is explaining their situation and to afford them time and attention.

Ask participants what the experience was like, if it was challenging, enjoyable or surprising.

Peg exercise during lunch: simply a fun activity to get people to think about the meaning of resilience and uncertainty (or any 'complex' term). This allows interaction between participants at lunch and keeps people on topic.

Ask participants if it was hard to describe the meaning of the words without using the word.

Web of Life

Use on the day: outside, after lunch as a re-energiser.

Purpose: to demonstrate how dynamic and intricate systems are, and to activate participants.

Take participants to a large open space. Instruct participants to pick two people in the group and keep them in mind, and do not share with anyone. Instruct participants to keep the same distance between them and their two selected people. Leave the group to settle, this usually takes a minute or so. Select someone in the middle of the group and pull them to the outside of the group and watch the group re-adjust.

Facilitate a discussion around what the dynamics of the group were and how difficult it was to find a settled state.

Systems Mapping

Use on the day: Asking participants to represent stakeholders in a system in response to: 'What does a rural community look like as a system? Who can influence community vulnerability & resilience?'

Purpose: To represent the stakeholders, relationships and mechanisms for change within a complex situation as a system.

Systems mapping can be interpreted in a number of different ways. In its simplest form, ask participants to draw a large circle on butchers paper as a system. Then instruct participants to represent actors within a situation by drawing a circle within and labelling them. As they begin to draw the actors, ask them to cluster them in appropriate clusters or groups of

actors. The clusters should become self-evident within the system and may include types by service delivery, operations of an actor, the role they play in the community etc. This may take a few iterations and participants are encouraged to continue to draw their system until they are happy with it. Additional steps include drawing links between actors to demonstrate relationships.

In a group, ask participants to explain their system including actors, relationships and complexities.

Force Field Analysis

Use on the day: groups of participants to think of a problem preventing their system from becoming a rural resilient community and investigate the forces that contribute or take away from the problem.

Purpose: to determine forces that affect a problem situation to investigate means to improve the situation.

Ask participants to think of a problem. Instruct participants to draw a line landscape across a piece of butchers paper and to write the problem along the line. Explain to participants that there are forces that make this problem worse and there are forces that can make this problem better.

Explain the following diagram:
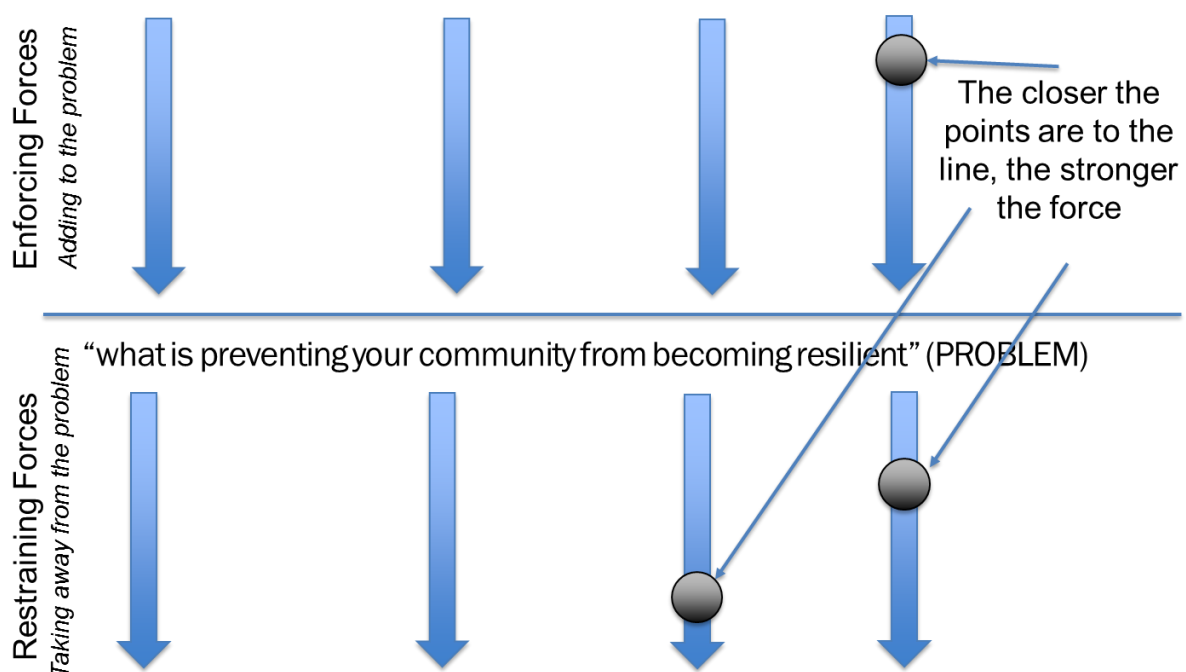
Ask participants to represent the forces affecting their problem this way. Explain that forces above and below the line can be opposing, but don't always have to be. This activity should take around 15-20 minutes in its first iteration.

After participants have represented the forces, then instruct them to demonstrate the strength of those forces by drawing dots on the forces. As illustrated above, the closer the dot is to the problem line, the stronger it is, and vice versa.

Ask participants to do this for each force. Then ask participants to think about what would be the most valuable forces to alter to manage the problem better.

Allow participants to feedback.

PQR

Use on the day: participants were asked to think about one of their 'forces' from the preceding activity and generate an action using PQR.

Purpose: To determine the next action to deal with a complex problem. To break down the problem into manageable chunks; what, how and why.

PQR statements provide a structured way to break down a problem into an action to manage it.

Provide participants with the following line:

A system to do **P**, by **Q**, to achieve **R**

Ask participants to think about reversing a problem, what would be the ideal outcome, and then work backwards. Often this is the easiest way to develop a PQR statement.

Remember:

P = What
Q = How
R = Why

Ask participants what was difficult about the exercise and what was useful. How can this statement be translated into real life?

Reflections

Use on the day: to close the social learning loop for the day and facilitate shared reflection on the workshop.

Purpose: Justified and facilitated reflection on a situation or system undergoing change. This allows learning or change to be tracked throughout the process.

Often we don't allow ourselves time to reflect. When is it ever fully justified?

Well to complete (or take another step) in the social learning process, or while navigating a complex situation, it is often helpful to reflect in a structured way. This complements bracketing, treating bracketing as a starting point, and periodic reflection as 'check-points' along the way. This technique is useful in everyday life, as a data collection technique or to document change.

Ask participants to address the following questions upon reflecting on a situation, a workshop or meeting.

What was new?

What was challenging?

How has your perspective changed?

What are you taking away?

What was most important?

If you have undertaken bracketing at the start of the process, it is often useful to ask participants to reflect on their expectations and assumptions whilst reflecting.

Instruct participants to take 5-10 minutes in silence to ask these questions of themselves and note them down. Don't interrupt.

After everyone is finished, invite the group to share one reflection with the wider group. If using this technique at the close of a meeting or workshop, it is nice to finish in a circle, standing.

Close

As previously mentioned, this handbook outlines activities from the perspective of the workshop facilitators, and they are by no-means prescriptive. Additionally, there are a whole host of additional activities to compliment these. We encourage research to determine the most appropriate approach for your situation, and to tailor activities to get the most beneficial outcomes.