

SOCIAL DESIGN IMPACT METHOD

The method you see before you is a preliminary version, developed by lector Anja Overdiek and researcher Jet van der Touw from the research group Cybersocial Design at Hogeschool Rotterdam, in collaboration with partners: Afdeling Buitengewone Zaken, Studio Gerard-Jan van Leeuwen, MV Design, Zeewaardig, en Dutch Design Foundation.

The goal of this method is to help social designers determine where they want to have an impact with their project. To achieve long-term societal impact, designers must act at different system levels. This method introduces four relevant system levels (leverage areas) and provides step-by-step guidance in determining influence through these system levels. The method builds upon the model of Anna Birney (2012).

The method can be used for four scenarios:

1. In preparation for a project (decision-making method)
2. For reflection during a project (reflection method)
3. To determine focus during a project (decision-making method)
4. As an end evaluation tool (impact evaluation method)



*In collaboration with the following partners:
Afdeling Buitengewone Zaken, Studio Gerard-Jan
van Leeuwen, MV Design, Zeewaardig en Dutch
Design Foundation. Rotterdam, 2024.*

*This work is licensed under an open license:
CC BY-SA 4.0.*

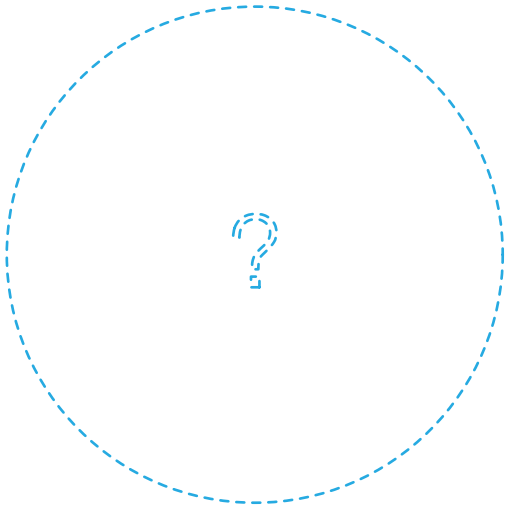
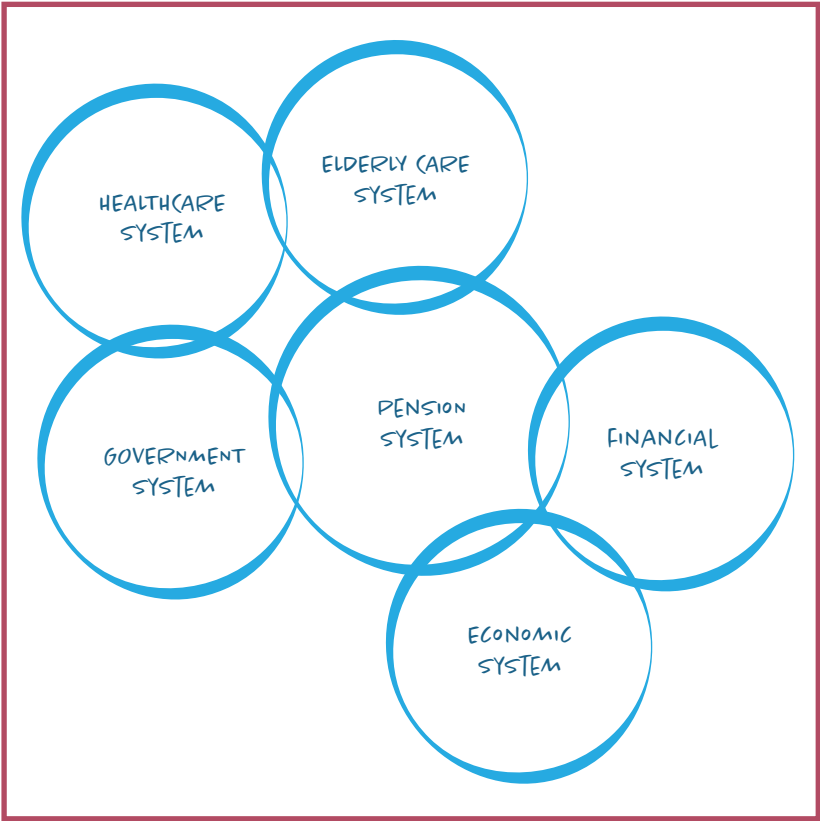
DETERMINING SYSTEMS

Which systems are related to your project?

Look at the example below. Draw or cut out circles and write on them the systems that your project is or could be related to. Write down as many systems as are relevant. How do these systems overlap? For which system would you then like to determine your impact?

Tip: First, think about or discuss the context of the project, and then determine the relevant systems from that context.

A system is a set of interconnected components (people, places, organizations, etc.) that are all related to one another and share a common goal.



FINDING LEVERAGE AREAS

What are the leverage areas in the system(s) you are working with?

A leverage area is a specific point in a system where small changes can have a large impact on the system as a whole. (Meadows, 1997). The size of the circle in this model represents the degree of possible influence.

*Fill in the areas.
Given the stakeholders, what influence do you have on each area?
Discuss this or write it down.*



COLLECTIVE MENTALITY AND PARADIGM

A mentality or paradigm is the philosophy underlying a system. Paradigms are often large, implicit assumptions. Implicit because everyone knows them. Some systems thinkers believe that the greatest opportunity (and thus the leverage) to change the system lies at this level.

Compared to the goals of the entire system, collective mentality and paradigms are the foundation of the system; the system is built upon them (Meadows, 1997). Individualism and capitalism are, for example, two current paradigms in Western society.



SYSTEM GOALS

A system goal is the objective around which people, activities, and resources of the system are organized. A system is there to change something.

For example, what is the current goal of the healthcare system? Right now, it is to treat people who are sick. Another system goal could be to prevent people from getting sick. These two different goals could create different types of healthcare systems.



PATTERNS OF RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATION

All systems are fundamentally relational. When a system changes, new social relationships usually emerge. For example, as the healthcare system becomes more collaborative, the relationships between doctors, patients, and staff change. Shared decision-making and decentralized power could improve trust, communication, and enhance care quality.

An important aspect of relations and organization is power. When power shifts to others who determine how resources are distributed, what takes priority, who matters, and what is considered a good outcome, this can bring about significant changes in the system.



SYSTEM STRUCTURES AND RESOURCES

The structure and the various flows of resources (such as money, knowledge, communication) are the most noticeable aspects of a system and are usually the first things you look at to understand a system.

There are two moments when changes in resources and structures stand out the most. The first is during a crisis, when you have to deal with a shortage of existing resources. The second is when a new type of resource is introduced. In both situations, you need to reassess the structures and how these resources are used or need to be built up (Leadbeater, Winhall, 2020, p.34).

PLANNING INFLUENCE

Which leverage areas do you want to use to achieve the desired influence?

This step is intended as a brainstorm to plan the influence you want to have.

First, come up with an idea for each leverage area (the larger the area, the greater the influence). You might also consider the connections between specific leverage areas and the influence you want to have.

Then, look at where your choices lie, based on the influence you think you can have. You could also determine this together with a client.



COLLECTIVE MENTALITY AND PARADIGM

How can we **change** the mental models underlying the system?



SYSTEM GOAL

How can we **align and coordinate** the objectives of the entire system?



PATTERNS OF RELATIONS AND ORGANIZATION

How can we **create** new systemic ways of organizing?
How could we **support** the distribution of power?



SYSTEM STRUCTURES AND RESOURCES

How can we **reconfigure** structures and flows?

