

## GUIDE TO ACTOR MAPPING

### What is an actor map?

An actor map is a visual depiction of the key organizations and/or individuals that make up a system, including those directly affected by the system as well as those whose actions influence the system.

*Note: Actor maps are sometimes referred to as stakeholder maps; however, given that important influencers (e.g., government) are not always stakeholders in a systems change initiative, we use the more inclusive term “actor maps” for purposes of this guide.*

### How can actor mapping support systems thinking and practice?

- ✓ Context
  - Understand general landscape (e.g., key actors, organizations, initiatives)
  - Determine who needs to be involved
- ✓ Connections
  - Explore various actors’ roles in the system
  - Diagnose the strength of connections among actors
  - Consider how relationships, roles, or information flows are changing
- ✓ Patterns
  - Determine where the energy is in the system and where there are gaps or blockages
  - Understand how structures are changing
- ✓ Perspectives
  - Consider who is, has been, or should be involved
  - Identify opportunities to build new relationships and explore other parts of the system

### Actor Mapping versus Stakeholder Analysis

Actor mapping is related to, but fundamentally distinct from, traditional stakeholder analysis.

Stakeholder analysis is “a process of systematically gathering and analyzing qualitative information to determine whose interests should be taken into account when developing and/or implementing a policy or program.”<sup>1</sup> Stakeholder analysis seeks to assess individuals’ or groups’ ability to influence specific projects, policies, or outcomes. The goal of these analyses is typically to produce a prioritized list of key individuals or groups to target as part of an action plan. By contrast, actor mapping explores the relationships and connections among actors, as well as their relationships to a given issue, project,

<sup>1</sup> *Stakeholder Analysis Guidelines*. (undated) Kammi Schmeer. Available online [here](#).

or intended outcome. The purpose of actor mapping is to identify opportunities to improve a system’s overall performance by, for example, strengthening weak connections or filling gaps in the system. In addition, we avoid using the word “stakeholder” because some actors that may not have a “stake” in a particular initiative or outcomes may still wield influence over the initiative or be influenced by it.

## PHASE ONE: FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT

### 1. Is actor mapping right for your project?

Considerations	Use Actor Mapping	Don't Use Actor Mapping
Focus	✓ The “who” of the system	✗ The “what” or “why” of the system
Boundaries	✓ Agreement on the boundaries of the system actors being mapped (e.g., by geography, specificity)	✗ Lack of agreement on the boundaries that would be used to map system actors

### 2. What do I need to properly facilitate an actor mapping session?

An actor mapping session typically takes 1.5 – 2 hours to facilitate. Preparation requirements are outlined below.

	Description
<b>Total prep time</b>	8 – 10 hours
<b>Prep work (activities)</b>	Frame activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the topic and set clear boundaries</li> <li>• Frame the system</li> <li>• Identify an initial set of key actors</li> </ul> Prepare a draft map (optional) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Populate the draft frame with key actors</li> </ul>
<b>Required materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitation agenda and talking points</li> <li>• A large (approximately 36” x 48”) printed copy of the draft system frame or actor map</li> <li>• A set of prepopulated sticky notes (to be developed during the prep process, below)</li> <li>• Blank sticky notes</li> <li>• Sharpie markers in multiple colors</li> <li>• Dot stickers in multiple colors</li> <li>• Flip chart and paper</li> </ul>

## PHASE TWO: PREP

Careful preparation in advance of a live actor mapping session is critical to success. During the preparation process, as we describe below, the facilitator or facilitation team will make several important strategic decisions. For example, they might consider questions such as: What will be the boundaries around the issue at hand? What is the right altitude to focus the map on? What level of detail is appropriate for the actor map? They will then develop a draft “system frame” (see below) for participants to build on. This preparatory work will provide guidance to mapping participants and help ensure a productive, energizing session.

Follow the guidelines below to prepare for an actor mapping session.

### 1. Identify the Topic and Set Clear Boundaries

The first step in the mapping process is to identify the topic for the map and set boundaries around that topic. The specificity of your topic will depend on a few factors, including:

- The desired geographic scale of the map (e.g., local, regional, national).
- The degree of specificity desired of the map (a generic actor map focuses on different types of actors, such as schools, government agencies, and service providers, whereas a specific actor map focuses on specific organizations, initiatives, and/or individuals). Several factors are likely to inform this strategic decision, including the intended purpose of the map, the backgrounds and expertise of mapping session participants, the desired degree of input or direction from participants, the time available for the mapping session, and the plan for refining and finalizing the actor maps.
- When determining the level of specificity for the map, aim for a level of detail that allows you to meaningfully summarize the behavior of an individual actor or type of actors, capture relevant variation, and illustrate relationships between actors. Aim for a level of aggregation that allows users to interact with the map and generate meaningful insights without becoming overwhelmed.

#### *Helpful Hint*

If needed, you can create separate maps on subtopics and/or different levels of detail to reduce complexity. For example, an early childhood map might include one map on the care and education sector and another on the health sector. Additionally, one map could be created with a local community landscape lens and one with a state or national policy lens.

### 2. Frame the System

The “system frame” refers to the loose organizing structure for the actor map that identifies the map’s core (e.g., the core beneficiaries of, or primary stakeholders in, the systems-change work) and the related subsystems that influence the main system. The frame serves as a conceptual guide for session participants.

Follow the steps below to create a system frame:

1. Identify the core of the map and place the core at the center of the page.
2. Draw a circle around the core and label it (e.g., “Children birth to age eight”).
3. Identify related subsystems that influence the core. (For example, in an early childhood actor map, related subsystems might include health, education, childcare, and social services.) Designate space for each related subsystem around the core.

*Sample System Frame*



### **3. Identify an Initial Set of Key Actors and Roles in the System**

Identifying actors and roles (e.g., provider, practitioner, funder, policymaker) is a useful preparatory step that helps participants get started efficiently and effectively on an actor mapping session. Participants will continue to add additional actors and roles throughout the actor mapping process.

Follow the steps below to identify the actors that will populate your draft map.

- Identify relevant actors and roles from internal documents (e.g., strategic plans, evaluation reports) and existing research (e.g., landscape assessments).
- Brainstorm additional relevant actors and roles using these prompts.
  - What people or places do core stakeholders interact with on a regular basis? (For example, in a map focused on third grade reading, this category of actors might include schools, teachers, principals, coaches, and local faith-based leaders, among others.)
  - What organizations support or influence those that interact with the core? (For example, a teachers association would provide support to teachers.)
  - What types of local, regional, national, or international organizations influence the core’s experiences related to the topic? (For example, local school boards.)
  - Who funds relevant people, places, or organizations?
  - Who conducts relevant research?
  - Who sets policy?
- Filter the list for the most influential actors based on perceived level of influence over the core. Write these actors’ names on sticky notes so each group of participants (see below) has a set.

#### *Helpful Hints*

The number of actors identified in this step will vary based on the complexity of the system and the desired level of detail to be provided in the map. One simple heuristic is to think about three levels — “the part, the whole, and the greater whole.”<sup>2</sup>

When assessing influence, it may be helpful to consider factors such as size/footprint, evidence of past achievements, key relationships, and commitment to the issue, among others.

#### **4. (Optional): Populate a Draft Map and Share It with Participants**

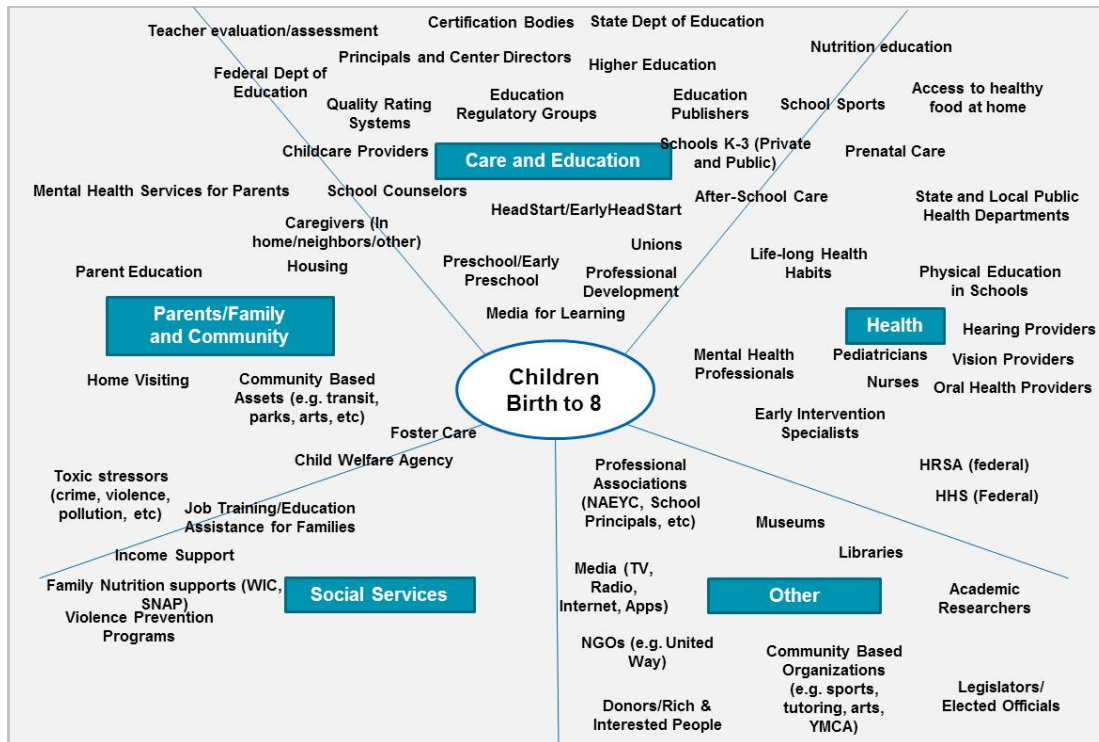
Depending on how well developed the facilitation team wishes the draft actor map to be, an optional final step in the preparation process is to place the actors identified in Step 3 onto the draft system frame and share the draft actor map with participants in advance of the session.

The cover email to participants should do the following.

- Provide context, including a reminder of the objectives of the mapping session and a review of key decisions made in the preparation process (e.g., how the core of the system is defined or bounded). It may be helpful to indicate what, if any, feedback the facilitation team seeks on these basic strategic decisions during the live mapping session.
- Encourage participants to set aside a half hour to review the draft actor map before the session and reflect on the following questions.
  - What are your responses to the structure of the map (e.g., the core, the system boundaries, the related systems)?
  - What changes might you suggest to the current placement of actors on the map?
  - What organizations, agencies, companies, or individuals would you suggest adding to the map? How do these actors connect to what’s already depicted?

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Glenda Eoyang and her colleagues at the Human System Dynamics Institute. *FAQs about Tools and Patterns of HCD*. Undated. <http://www.hsdinstitute.org/about-hsd-institute/simple-rules.html>.

Sample Pre-Session Draft Map<sup>3</sup>



### PHASE THREE: FACILITATION

The section below offers practical tips on how to structure and facilitate a 1.5- to 2-hour actor mapping session. The ideal group size for a session of this type is approximately 10 to 25 people who represent a diversity of perspectives on the target issue (e.g., those who come from different organizations or teams or have different backgrounds, areas of expertise, or life experiences).

#### Getting Started: Room Setup and Materials Needed

- Allocate 1.5 – 2 hours for the mapping session.
- Divide participants into groups of four or five. Distribute participants so that groups have a diversity of content expertise, level of seniority, level of tenure, etc.
- Note: You can ask each small group to work on the same actor map, or you can assign each small group a specific subsystem to work on. In either case, the facilitation team will need to combine the small groups’ efforts after the session.
- Arrange the room so each group has a workspace with:
  - A large (approximately 36” x 48”) printed copy of the draft system frame or actor map
  - A set of prepopulated sticky notes (from the preparation process, above)
  - Blank sticky notes, sharpie markers, dot stickers in multiple colors, and a flip chart

<sup>3</sup> Example is from FSG’s work with the Institute of Medicine to develop a system map of the early childhood space.

## Facilitation Steps

### 1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Provide a brief introduction to the exercise (see sample verbiage below).

#### Stage-Setting Introduction

*The facilitator should adapt the introduction below to correspond with the selected topic.*

#### Introduction to actor mapping

- “A *system* map is a visual depiction of the parts, interactions, and relationships between actors, organizations, and other components of a system at a point in time.”
- “An *actor* map is a type of system map that focuses on relationships and interconnections between various actors. These maps help show how the parts of, or people within, a system are connected, identify weak connections or gaps, bring out ideas for intervention points in the system, and help identify ways of determining whether these changes have occurred.”

#### Overview of activity

- “Today, we will participate in an actor mapping activity to better understand the roles, engagement, relationships, momentum, blockages, and opportunities in our system. Our activity will include several steps: populating actors, refining the map, identifying engagement, relationships and/or connections, mapping momentum and blockages, and identifying opportunities for influence.”
- “We will use these maps to discuss our observations and implications for future action.”

### 2. Populating the Map with Actors (15 – 20 minutes)

In this step, participants begin to build the actor maps. The pre-labeled sticky notes provide participants with examples to stimulate additional brainstorming. **Note:** *For simplicity’s sake, the guidance below assumes that the facilitation team skipped Step 4 of Phase 2 above (i.e., that the team did not share a draft actor map with participants in advance of the session). If a draft was shared with participants, the facilitation team should skip this step and move to Step 3 below.*

- Ask participants to take 15 minutes to place the pre-labeled sticky notes on the actor map frame by reading the instructions below aloud to the group.

#### Speaking notes

- “You will see that we have prepared a draft frame for the actor map, identifying related subsystems where you may wish to place the sticky notes.”
- “Each group has a set of sticky notes with names or descriptions of key actors already written on them. Take 15 minutes as a group to place each sticky note where you think it belongs on the map, following these guidelines.
  - Place actors on the map in a way that illustrates which subsystem they belong to. If the actor cuts across two subsystems, place the sticky note in between. You may

modify the frame by adding or crossing out related subsystems as needed.

- Place actors on the map in a way that illustrates their degree of influence (*e.g., place actors with direct influence on the system in or close to the center*).
- Place actors on the map in a way that illustrates their “proximity” to one another (*e.g., place an individual school next to its related school district*).”

**Note:** *You may need to adjust the draft language above if you are asking each small group to work on a different subsystem within the actor map.*

### 3. Refining the Actor Map (20 minutes)

In this step, participants are given the opportunity to react to a draft actor map, refine earlier work, and/or make changes to adjust for external context. **Note:** *This step is an appropriate starting point for groups that are building on a more well-developed draft map or revisiting existing actor maps.*

- Guide participants through a 20-minute activity to refine the actor map using the instructions below.

#### **Speaking notes**

- “Now we want to leverage your diverse expertise to improve the map.”
- “Are there additional types of actors/organizations at play that are important to <topic>? What’s missing?”
- “Please take 3 minutes to write these actors/organizations on sticky notes. Note that we are not trying to build a comprehensive list of actors; rather, we are trying to capture the most relevant actors.” (3 minutes)
- “Please take 10 minutes to discuss these new additions and plot each where it belongs on the actor map.” (10 minutes)
- “Are there types of actors/organizations depicted here that are not important to <topic> and should be excluded? If yes, please move/remove these sticky notes.” (5 minutes)

### 4. Mapping Level of Engagement, Relationships, and Connections (15 minutes)

In this step, participants identify levels of engagement of different actors, as well as relationships and connections among actors, organizations, and related systems.

- Guide participants through a 15-minute activity to map level of engagement, relationships, and connections among actors on the map. Choose among options below (could be a hybrid), based on the specific context and need.



### ***Speaking Notes***

#### **Option A: Level of Engagement of Various Actors**

- “Discuss the level of engagement in the initiative for each actor on the map. The level could be strong (S), moderate (M), weak (W), or no engagement (N).”
- “Draw an S, M, W, or N on the relevant actors.” (Note: These could also be depicted through colors and gradations if/when the map is transferred to an electronic format.)

#### **Option B: Relationship of an Organization/Initiative to the Actors**

- “Discuss your organization’s/initiative’s relationship with each actor on the map. Use the dot stickers to indicate your engagement with each actor. (Use different color dots, if needed, to represent the different departments/groups that have the relationship.)
- “Feel free to place multiple stickers on a single actor if multiple participants or departments hold relationships with that actor.”

#### **Option C: Connections Between Actors**

- “Discuss relevant connections between actors on the map. Note these connections on the map by drawing lines between relevant actors. Use solid lines for strong or established relationships and dotted lines for weak or emerging relationships.”
- “Write the type of relationship above the line. For example, is it a funding relationship? A partnering relationship on a key initiative?”
- “Again, we are not attempting to be exhaustive, but rather to capture the most important strong and weak relationships in the system.”

## **5. Identifying Momentum, Blockages, and Opportunities (15 minutes)**

In this step, participants identify momentum and blockages in the system based on their understanding of the relationships among actors, organizations, and related subsystems.

- Guide participants through a 15-minute activity to identify momentum and blockages.

### ***Speaking Notes***

- “Now that we have a sense of the connections and gaps among key actors and organizations in the system, we can begin to understand momentum and blockages and think about opportunities for influence.”

#### **Areas of Momentum or Blockages in the System**

- “For 5 to 6 minutes, review the connections among actors and discuss what parts of the system have positive energy and momentum. Place a green dot on those actors or clusters of

actors.”

- “Take the next five minutes to consider where the main blockages, challenges, or gaps are in the system. Place a red dot on those actors or clusters of actors.”

#### **Potential Opportunities for Influence**

- “For the next 5 minutes, step back to take a bird’s-eye view of the actor map. Based on where the green and red dots fall, draw amoeba-like shapes around different groups of actors that form clusters that indicate opportunity for leverage and influence. Name the clusters if possible (e.g., policy change).”

### **6. Discussing Implications (15 – 45 minutes)**

The discussion of implications will vary, depending on the goals of the actor mapping exercise (e.g., strategy development, evaluation). Sample guiding questions are below.

#### **Sample Questions (Strategy Development)**

- What parts of the system are ripe for action? If relevant: To what extent are we engaged in these areas?
- What key opportunities are we poised to build on? To what extent are we ignoring obstacles that pose a risk to our strategy’s success?
- What new people or organizations need to be involved moving forward? What is the best way to get them engaged?

#### **Sample Questions (Evaluation)**

- Where in the system has our organization/initiative had the most/least influence?
- To what extent did we bring the right people to the table to create the desired change?
- Where have we made progress on our intended outcomes, and where have we experienced challenges?

#### *Small Group Discussion*

Open the discussion using the speaking notes below, adjusting the time as appropriate.

#### **Speaking Notes: Small Group Discussion**

- “It is important that we dedicate time to bring out insights and questions about the system.”
- “For the next 20 minutes, each group will discuss a series of questions (sample questions above) posted on this flip chart and in your handout.” (If a handout was provided.)
- “Appoint one person in each group to take notes and report out to the large group after the discussion. You will be asked to report on key takeaways from your discussion.”

### *Full Group Report-Out*

In the remaining time, facilitate a full group report-out and discussion using the speaking notes below.

#### **Speaking Notes: Full Group Report-Out**

- [Open with a brief reflection about similarities and differences between the different groups' maps and discussions]
- Going around the room, ask each group to please share:
  - “What was your experience like with the actor mapping? What was easy about it? What was challenging? What did you learn?”
  - “What are 1 or 2 of the major additions or changes you made to the actor map?”
  - “What are 2 or 3 key takeaways from your group's discussion?”
- Once each group has had a chance to share, ask the full group: “Based on your experience and what you have heard from the other groups, what additional interesting observations do you have about the maps? What questions have today's activity raised about the system? What initial implications are you seeing for future efforts toward [your goal]?”

### **7. Review Next Steps (5 minutes)**

At the conclusion of the mapping session, it is helpful to provide participants with a clear overview of next steps. For example, you may wish to share the following.

- Information about if or when participants will have another opportunity to work on the maps. (We recommend going through at least two iterations with each major stakeholder group.)
- Information about who else may have an opportunity to view and/or edit the maps.
- Plans regarding the final format of the maps (e.g., conversion to PowerPoint or online software).
- Plans regarding how the maps will be used within and outside the organization.
- Information about whether the maps will be made publicly available, and if so, to what end and with what audiences.

#### **Actor Mapping Technologies: FSG's Experience**

Over the past few years, several technology platforms have emerged to support system change leaders in visualizing actors and networks. FSG has used one of these tools, [Kumu](#), to develop a series of detailed, interactive maps (shown on the following page).

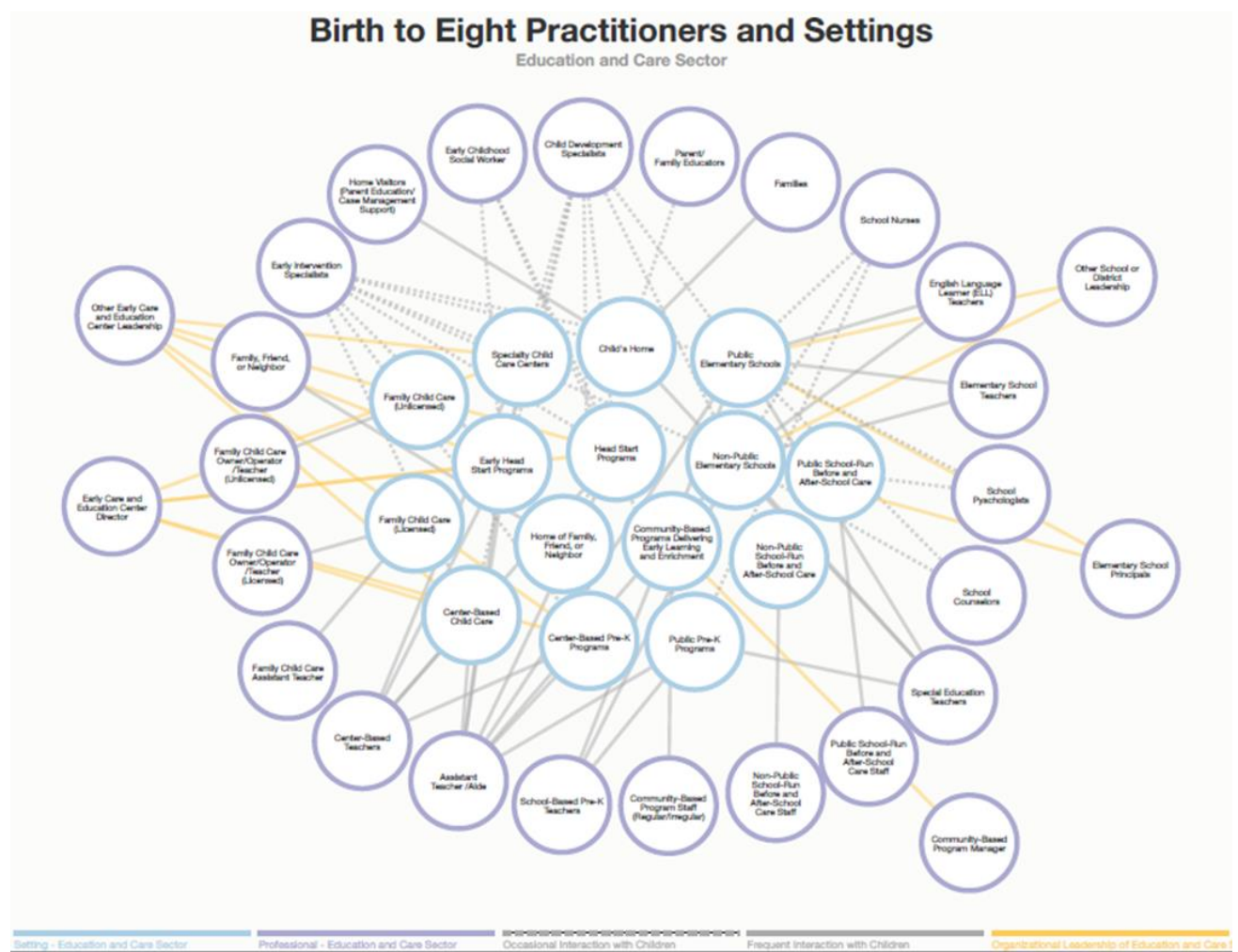
#### *How we used Kumu*

In one instance, we used Kumu's technology to develop several maps that illustrate the complex landscape of systems that provide or support services for young children and their families, including the settings, professional roles, and other actors and organizations involved in supporting the development, learning, and health of children from birth through age eight.

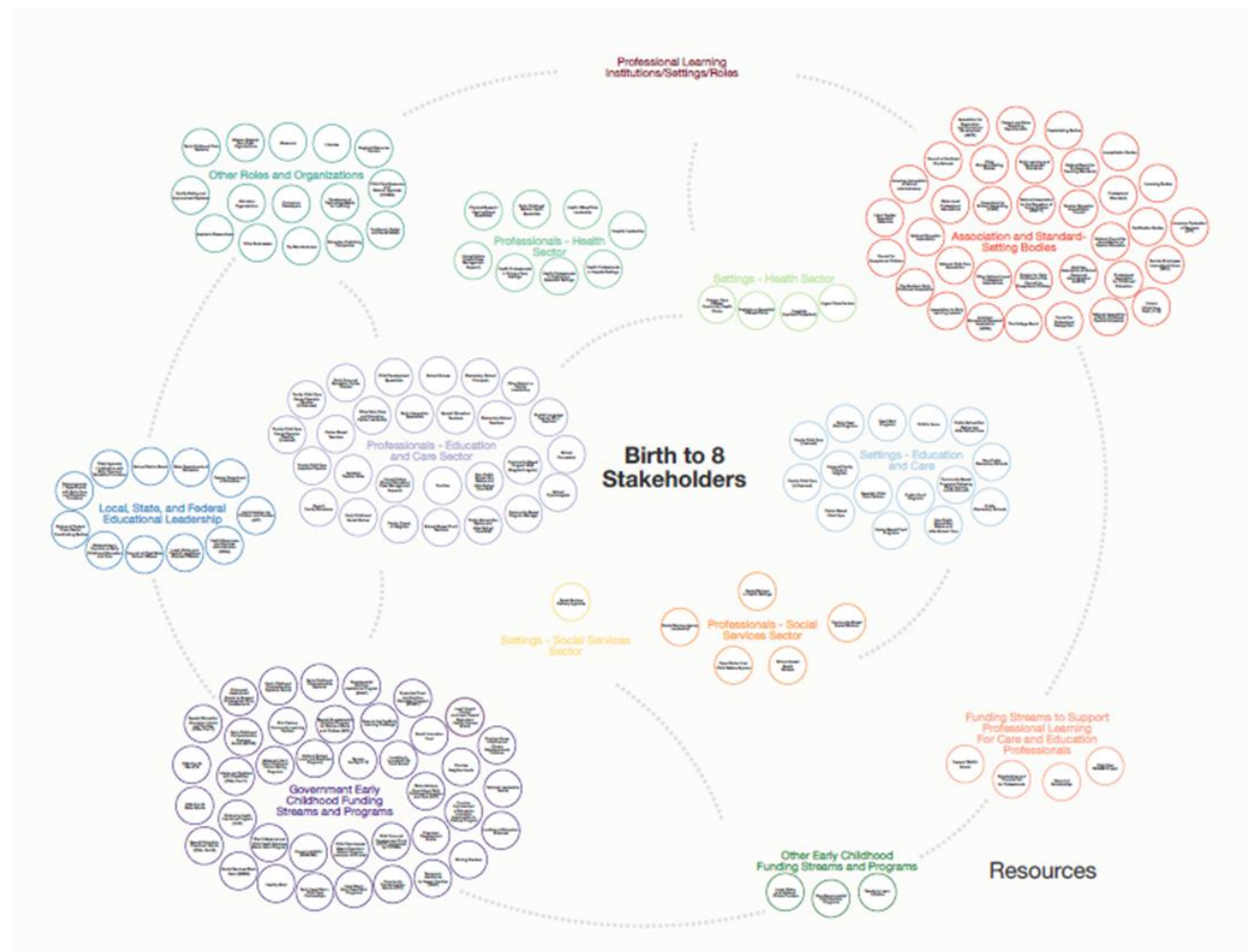
### How we used the maps

The maps provided a framework to help us and our clients explore, in a specific context, how to strategically engage stakeholders in strengthening supports for the early childhood workforce and identify potential levers of change in these systems, including what connections were already relatively strong and what connections needed to be strengthened.

### Sample Kumu map: Relationships among key early childhood actors



## Sample Kumu map: Key actors by role



### PHASE FOUR: REFINING AND REVISING THE ACTOR MAPS

In most cases, it may be necessary to revisit the actor map generated through the facilitation process above. (For example, some participants can benefit from additional time to reflect on the actor map or to conduct research; in other cases, it is important to socialize the map with key partners or stakeholders who did not participate in the original mapping session. In these cases, we recommend beginning with Step 3 (“Refining the Actor Map”) and continuing through the next steps of the process outlined above. Once there is a certain comfort level with the map, it can be transferred to an electronic format. We would also suggest revisiting and updating the map at least every six months or around key decision-making points. One approach might be to reflect on the map with members of the original stakeholder groups and/or new participants and discuss the ways the composition of actors and their relationships, momentum, and blockages have changed. Depending on participants’ depth of knowledge/immersion in the area, consider grounding these updated actor mapping sessions in a series of external interviews and/or light-touch secondary research.

## FINAL CONSIDERATION: EXPLICIT DATA VERSUS IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

One last consideration to keep in mind is how much we want the steps in the mapping process to be informed by explicit data and to what extent we are comfortable using participants' implicit knowledge. We would recommend using data from sources such as evaluation reports, landscape assessments, and subject matter experts to identify the level of engagement, type and nature of connections, and evidence of energy and momentum and/or blockages in the system. However, in our experience, this type of data isn't often readily available, and we have to rely more on the implicit knowledge and judgment of participants. This raises two implications: 1) ensuring that we have the right set of participants who bring expertise on different aspects of the system, and 2) utilizing the actor mapping process as one, but by no means the only, input into an overall evaluation or strategy development effort.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Introducing Systems Thinking](#). The Systems Practice team at the UK Open University.
  - [Guide to Diagrams](#)
- [Systems Change: A Guide to What It Is and How to Do It](#). Guide authored by Ellen Harries, Rachel Wharton, and Rob Abercrombie. New Philanthropy Capital, June 2015.
- [Introduction to Systems Mapping](#). Blog post authored by Joelle Cook. FSG, August 2015.
- [System Mapping in Action](#). Blog post authored by Lauren M. Smith. FSG, November 2015.
- [A Practical Guide to System Mapping](#). Blog post authored by Srik Gopal. FSG, December 2015.
- [Resource List](#) from the "System Mapping Made Simpler" workshop designed by Tanya Beer and Julia Coffman (Center for Evaluation Innovation), delivered at the 2015 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) Learning Conference.



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