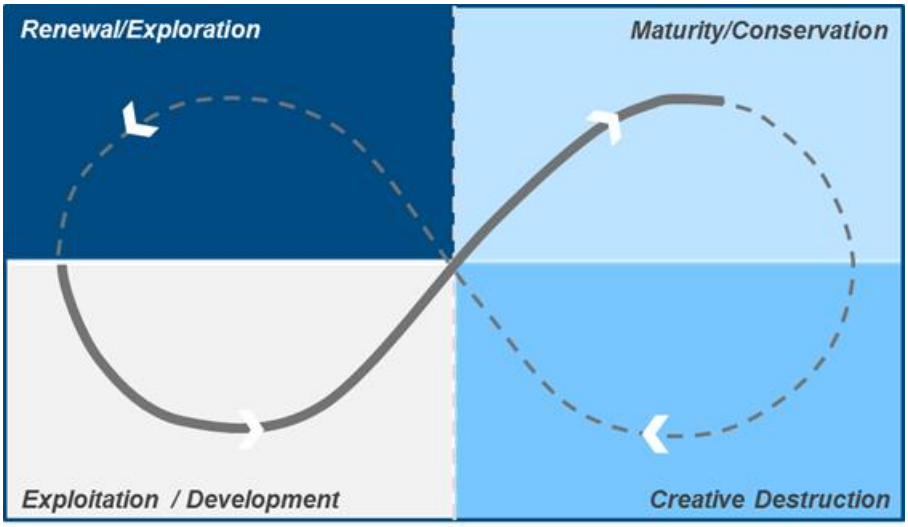
# GUIDE TO ECOCYCLE MAPPING

**Blank Ecocycle Map**




## ECOCYCLE MAPPING OVERVIEW

### What is an ecocycle?

The concept of an ecocycle draws on biological research into the closed-loop system of development, conservation, destruction, and renewal that is seen in natural (ecological) systems.[1] The ecocycle suggests that the long-term sustainability of adaptive organizations requires that elements of those organizations undergo periodic, natural processes of destruction and renewal.

### What is ecocycle mapping?

The ecocycle framework is a visual depiction of where on the ecocycle different initiatives, programs, or even parts of an organization are currently operating.

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

✓ Patterns

- Understand how an organization or initiative is allocating its energy and resources across the lifecycle (or how this allocation has changed over time).
- Determine where the energy is in the system and where there are gaps or blockages.
- Identify risks and diagnose challenges related to "traps" in the ecocycle (e.g., what we need to do more or less of to facilitate a healthy balance in our work).
- Understand how a strategy or initiative is evolving from a lifecycle perspective.

[1] Descriptions of the ecocycle framework throughout this guide are excerpted and lightly adapted from: David K. Hurst and Brenda J. Zimmerman, "From Life Cycle to Ecocycle: A New Perspective on the Growth, Maturity, Destruction, and Renewal of Complex Systems," *Journal of Management Inquiry December* 3 (1994): 339-354.

## ECOCYCLE MAPPING, PART ONE: FEASIBILITY ASSESSMENT

***1. Is ecocycle mapping right for your project?***

| Considerations | Use Ecocycle Mapping | Don't Use Ecocycle Mapping |
|---|---|---|
| Boundaries | ✓ You have a clear topic for exploration<br>✓ Your focus is "looking within" an organization, initiative, or strategy | x The topic for ecocycle mapping is not yet clear<br>x You want to understand the connections or relationships between activities, actors, or trends |
| Credible informants | ✓ Participants are familiar with the topic selected for the mapping activity and the organization or initiative's work related to it | x Participants cannot credibly speak to the topic and the organization or initiative's work in that area |

***2. What do I need to properly facilitate an ecocycle mapping session?***

An ecocycle mapping session typically takes 75–90 minutes to facilitate. Preparation requirements are outlined below.

| | Description |
|---|---|
| **Participant prep time** | No prep required for participants |
| **Facilitator prep time** | 2 hours to frame the activity; more for interviews (if applicable, see below) |
| **Facilitator prep work** | Setup for the activity<br>• Determine the topic for the mapping activity<br>• Determine for whom activities are being mapped (e.g., the organization, initiative, strategy, or program)<br>Conduct background research (optional)<br>• Conduct interviews or document review to identify an initial set of activities that could be included on the ecocycle map |
| **Required materials** | • Facilitation agenda and talking points<br>• A large (approximately 36" x 48") printed copy of the ecocycle framework (you can also use a whiteboard, if available)<br>• Sticky notes for adding or moving information on the ecocycle<br>• Sticky dots (multiple colors)<br>• Markers, pens<br>• Flip charts (one per group)<br>• Ecocycle handouts (one per person, see appendix) |

## ECOCYCLE MAPPING, PART TWO: PREP

1. **Select a topic for discussion.** The two most common types of topics for an ecocycle mapping activity are:
   - Efforts occurring within a system or set of related systems that influence a desired outcome (e.g., efforts to improve early childhood health equity, efforts to curb tobacco use)
   - Efforts within or related to a client's particular area of work (e.g., a program or set of programs, a grant portfolio)

2. **Do some research.** Consider preparing for the session by making an initial list of efforts that may be appropriate to place on the ecocycle. Information can be gathered through secondary research and interviews with people knowledgeable about the topic from different perspectives (internal and external).

3. **Create groups.** Consider assigning participants to small groups (six to eight people each) before they arrive, so that each group has a good mix of people from different backgrounds and perspectives.

4. **Room Setup and Materials Needed**
   - Allocate about 75–90 minutes for the ecocycle mapping session.
   - Arrange the room so each group has a workspace with:
     - A copy of the ecocycle framework (either on a poster-sized piece of paper taped to a wall or a large whiteboard)
     - Blank sticky notes, sharpie markers, dot stickers in multiple colors, and a flip chart
   - No preparation is required for session participants.

5. **Seating and Materials**
   - Divide (or assign) participants into groups of approximately six to eight people. The groups should be large enough to include participants with a diversity of content expertise, levels of seniority, levels of tenure, and other relevant characteristics, but small enough that every participant can actively engage in the activity and discussion.
   - Distribute an ecocycle mapping handout to each person. A sample handout may be found at the end of this guide.

## ECOCYCLE MAPPING, PART THREE: FACILITATION STEPS AND SUGGESTED TIMING

*An ecocycle mapping session typically takes about 75–90 minutes to facilitate.*

1. **Introduction (15 minutes)**
   - When participants are seated with their small group, provide an introduction to the ecocycle model and the mapping exercise, referring to the handout as appropriate.

   ***(Optional) Brainstorming (5–6 minutes)***
   - *Ask each participant to take 5–6 minutes to brainstorm a list of major activities, practices, policies, and other efforts related to the topic of discussion.*

2. **Plot Major Internal and External Efforts on the Ecocycle Framework (15 minutes)**
   - Ask each small group to take 15 minutes to plot major activities, programs, practices, policies, and other efforts on the ecocycle, based on their stage of development. Encourage the groups to briefly discuss the rationale for their plotting as they go along.

**3a. Analysis – Option One: Traps and Challenges (20–25 minutes)**

*This analytical approach is most appropriate when the topic for the mapping exercise is a set of efforts within or related to a particular area of work (e.g., a program or set of programs, a grant portfolio). The purpose of the analysis is to understand where there are blockages or challenges to movement through the cycle.*

- Prompt each group to reflect on which quadrants within the map show the greatest and the least amounts of activity. Where does there seem to be a lot of energy? Where might there be blockages in the movement of the system? (10 minutes)
- Encourage the groups to reflect on what, if any, traps the organization, department, or initiative is struggling with (e.g., scarcity trap). Refer to the handout for details on each trap (10 minutes).

**3b. Analysis – Option Two: Impact versus Resources (15–20 minutes)**

*This analytical approach is most appropriate when the topic for the mapping exercise is a set of efforts within a system or related systems that influence a desired outcome (e.g., efforts to improve early childhood health equity, efforts to curb tobacco use). The purpose of the analysis is to understand how resources are allocated relative to perceived impact.*

- Prompt each group to use **green** dots to identify activities that have had (or are likely to have) the greatest impact on the goal (5 minutes).
- Prompt each group to use **red** dots to identify the activities that have taken (or are likely to take) the greatest amount of time and resources at the organizational or initiative level (5 minutes).
- Encourage the groups to reflect on where there are significant mismatches between resource allocation and perceived impact (5–10 minutes).

4. **Reflection and Discussion (20–30 minutes)**
    - *Gallery Walk.* Invite participants to pair up or form small groups and take 10 minutes to walk through the room, observing other groups' work. Encourage participants to note similarities and differences across the groups' ecocycles.
    - *Discussion.* Engage the full group in a discussion based on a selection of the following questions:
        1. What general patterns do you see in the way activities, efforts, programs, practices, and policies are distributed across each stage?
        2. Are there opportunities to shift attention between phases to achieve greater balance?
        3. *For groups that chose Analytical Option 1:* What trap(s) do we appear to be struggling with based on the distribution of efforts on the ecocycle? Do the descriptions of the traps ring true to you? What implications for action are there related to these traps? What might cause us to take these actions?
        4. *For groups that chose Analytical Option 2:* To what degree do we appear to be focusing our time and resources on the efforts or activities that we believe have the greatest potential for impact? Which potentially influential activities might require more resources? Where might we (or others) scale back our resource investment due to low anticipated impact? What implications for action do we see in this map? What might cause us to take these actions?

## NEXT STEPS

At the conclusion of the ecocycle mapping session, consider providing participants with a clear overview of next steps. For example, you may wish to share:

- Plans regarding how the maps will be used within the organization or initiative;
- Information about whether or when participants will have another opportunity to work on the maps (typically, additional iterations with the group will not be required, but they might be desirable in some situations);
- Information about who else may have an opportunity to view or edit the maps; and
- Information about whether the maps will be made publicly available, and if so, to what end and with what audiences (typically, ecocycle maps are not made public; however, this might be desirable in some situations).

Consider revisiting and updating the map on a regular basis (e.g., every six months) or around key decision-making or learning junctures. For example, you could use this time to reflect on the map with members of the original stakeholder groups or new participants and discuss the ways the distribution of efforts across the ecocycle has changed over time.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Liberating structures: Ecocycle planning exercise
- The Ecocycle: A Mental Model for Understanding Complex Systems. David Hurst writes about some additional ideas about the ecocycle and its adaptation, March 2012.

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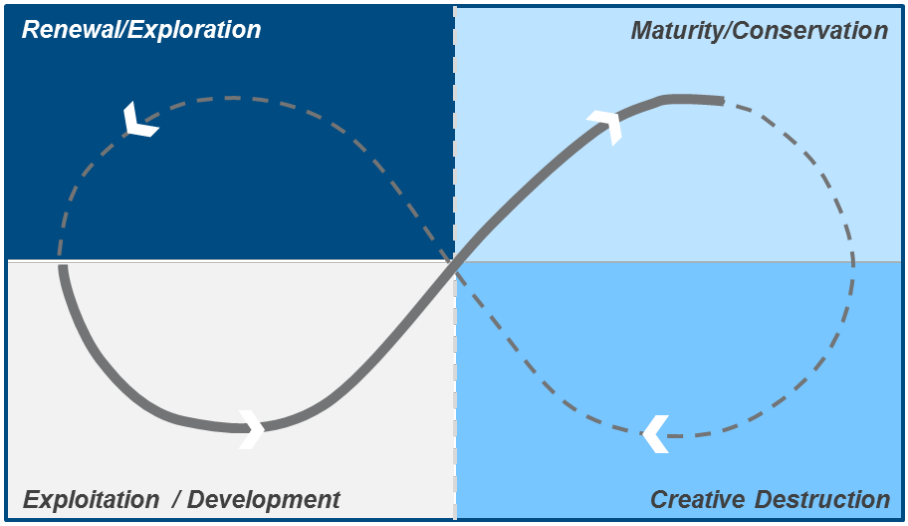
## ECOCYCLE MAPPING ACTIVITY—PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

**Introduction to the Ecocycle Framework**

- The ecocycle framework will help us understand where we are currently allocating our energy and resources, and:
    - Identify what we need to further invest in or deliberately stop doing to facilitate the health and renewal of our work
    - Determine the approaches and capacities needed for different phases of work
    - Achieve diversity in our work to allow for successful adaptation over time

- The ecocycle framework takes the shape of an infinity curve, symbolizing that there is no beginning or end to living systems and the interconnectedness of all things. The ecocycle has four stages, each representing a different "life phase" of an activity. Each stage is characterized by unique features that play a role in ongoing adaptation, and each can pose a "trap" that prevents an organization's activities from continuing to adapt.




- The "front side" of the curve may be familiar to students of management studies or organizational development theory as the "S-curve." This part of the loop focuses on moving from developing new ideas to engaging in deliberate planning and streamlining of efforts toward predictable success and efficiency. It usually stands alone in traditional management thinking. The ecocycle framework adds the "back side" of the curve—the recognition that creative destruction and renewal are natural and essential for the ongoing viability of a system or organization.

- A useful analogy for understanding the ecocycle is to think of the complex system of a forest. The table on the next page outlines the features of each phase of the cycle, beginning with moving up the traditional "S" curve. Throughout the table, the forest metaphor is employed to bring the ecocycle to life.

***Overview of ecocycle phases and potential traps***

| Phase | Potential Trap |
|---|---|
| **Exploitation/Development**<br>• This phase is like an open patch in a forest. A wide variety of species all compete for the same resources, and none is dominant. There are a lot of births in this stage; however, many of the new births do not reach maturity.<br>• In organizations, this is an entrepreneurial period of high energy, lots of new ideas, and trial and error learning. Resources are spread over a variety of projects or activities. | **Parasitic Trap**<br>In time, we need to consolidate resources and invest in the most promising ideas. Having too many activities in this stage for too long creates challenges to growth and sustainability. |
| **Maturity/Conservation**<br>• In the forest, competition starts to require efficiency. Resources become consolidated or conserved in a few trees that begin to dominate the space.<br>• In organizations, this phase involves planning, allocating resources to predictably successful activities, and streamlining operations for efficiency. Moving up the curve to this phase has been the aim of traditional management thinking. | **Rigidity Trap**<br>Activities can become too rigid and fail to adapt to current needs. Fear of failure or lack of exit plans can arise. |
| **Creative Destruction**<br>• In the forest, this phase is the forest fire. The system is not fully destroyed in the fire. The fire releases nutrients and genetic material into the soil to create the conditions for new growth.<br>• In organizations, this phase involves letting go of activities that have become too rigid and similar and are not responsive to current needs to free up resources and create the conditions for developing new ideas.<br>• It can be hard to acknowledge that some activities have lost their vitality or are not meeting current needs.<br>• But this phase can be a time for new insights and is crucial for freeing up resources to invest in new ideas that have more promise for the future. | **Chronic Disaster Trap**<br>Organizations find themselves spinning and unable to form a compelling vision and set of values. There is weakened trust and difficulty agreeing on a vision for the future. |
| **Renewal/Exploration**<br>• In a forest, this is the phase after the fire where open spaces have been created. The soil is rich with nutrients, and there are many possibilities for how these nutrients will be recombined. It is rich with potential, but it is not clear what combinations will be most successful.<br>• In organizations, this is a stage of creating connections to mobilize resources and skills to create the next generation of effective ideas. | **Scarcity Trap**<br>Compelling, credible ideas fail to emerge due to underdeveloped decision-making; energy is spread too thinly. |

- A healthy forest has patches—it has parts in each of the four phases. This looks disorganized, but keeps the forest viable and resilient over the long term. Recognizing this, firefighters now selectively let fires burn or even set fires intentionally to clear away dead wood and free nutrients for new generations of growth.

- The ecocycle shows us that it is not enough to move up the front side, the "S" curve. We also have to engage in creative destruction and renewal. The activities and structures we use to do our work are not the essence of our work. Letting go and experiencing change are essential aspects of keeping our work vital and viable to achieve our aims over the long term.