Ecosystem Mapping

This exercise is from the National Democratic Institute's [*Co/Act: Human Centered Design for Activists*](#)

Module Goals

The first module that begins your HCD journey is Ecosystem Mapping: think of this as a landscape analysis AND a project kickoff for your team. The goal of Ecosystem Mapping is to see where the team diverges on key issues, what misconceptions, misalignments, and confusion the team may potentially have, and use the exercises as a project kick off meeting to ensure everyone understands the project, deliverables and focus areas. For example, your team may have different conceptualizations of the issue you are addressing; even the tightest team with a hyper focused question can still come at a problem from different angles, and have different stakeholders, desires, or issues that they feel like are important to highlight. This is normal in a collaboration process, and ecosystem mapping can help get everyone aligned early on. Your job as the facilitator is to help create a space where people can share all of their different viewpoints about the project and help guide the participants towards cohesion of ideas, focuses, and outputs.

Note: There are two versions of Ecosystem Mapping: the condensed version and the full version. The goal and framing of the ecosystem modules is directly relevant to both versions. The only difference is that the condensed version has one exercise versus three exercises. As the facilitator, you should decide which version is most appropriate to your team. Has the team done a landscape or stakeholder analysis related to the potential issue area previously? If so, the condensed version might be a better fit. The full version is more appropriate for teams who are exploring new issue areas or are interested in a deeper dive into their local context. Below, you will see the full version and the condensed version exercises, which are separated out. The facilitator prompts are helpful regardless of which version you decide to run.

The "Full" Version Exercises

Exercise 1: What are you solving for? What is your problem statement?

This activity will help you focus on the overarching social issue that you wish to address through your product, service, or campaign.
- Time: ~ 1 hour
- Needs: different color markers, a poster size piece of paper
- Facilitator: Remember to track time!

(~10 minutes) Give each participant a marker and ask them to write down the problem they are interested in solving. Feel free to reference any materials you've included in previous or related projects, initial research, reports, etc. Some examples include "Preventing internet censorship," "Difficulty in registering to vote," or "Lack of awareness about MPs and how to engage with them." The facilitator should motivate participants to use the time to think deeply and get excited about the issues they wish to address. Don't be afraid to bring in your personal perspectives and experiences to the table during this exercise.

Take a break.

Exercise 2: People and the Problem

Next, take the above but let's complicate it and critique it more. Think about three individuals. These three individuals should be representative of the diverse communities who are affected by the problem you are focusing on. Come up with your own or use our's below:
- A 20-year old female college student who is blind
- A 35-year old LGBTQI+ college student
- A 65-year old man from an ethnic minority community who is retired

On the same butcher paper, write out in one bullet point how each issue would affect these people. Thinking about the issue from the lens of these different perspectives can highlight the nuances of each topic.

As a group, take the remaining 30 minutes to discuss the different issues. Think about how they relate to your organization's mission and resources. Take this time to debate and persuade each other on the issue area you feel is most relevant. Use this discussion to identify one issue area that will be the focus of your product, service, or campaign. To focus the discussion, the facilitator can encourage the group to vote on the top three problem statements, excluding their own entries. A strong idea benefits from a variety of perspectives and healthy debate; the facilitator should actively encourage all participants to express themselves. Remember to take a look at the "Need more Help?" or "I'm Stuck" section for assistance if necessary!

Exercise 3: Ecosystem Mapping- Who else is involved?

Once you have identified the issue that will be the focus of your product, service, or campaign, begin your ecosystem map. Your ecosystem map will outline the different power and information dynamics that may affect the feasibility and success of your project. The map will also identify potential partnerships and opportunities for collaboration.
- Time: ~ 30 minutes to 1 hour
- Needs: different color markers, highlighter, post-it (sticky) notes, a single large butcher paper
- Facilitator: Remember to track time! Take a look at the sections below if you get stuck and need additional tips and tricks.

Give each participant a marker and ask them to write the actors that influence your issue on the post-it notes (one actor per post-it note). Remember, these can be individuals or groups. Add your post-it notes to the butcher paper. Some questions to consider are:

- What is your problem statement? What are a few related issues?
- Who else cares about your problem?
- Who has power and who doesn't? Who has access or control over resources and who doesn't? What is the extent of that control or access?
- Who are the organizations working in the same space, both for and against the issue?
- What communities does the issue affect? Think about the individuals who are involved in providing a particular service (i.e. teachers) as well as beneficiaries (i.e. students)
- Who might currently be missing from the conversation around your problem?
- What current research have you done or collected in this space?
- What do you see missing? And how do you know?
- What are barriers you could face?

For each actor, how does it connect with other actors in this environment? Add bidirectional arrows between the post-it notes.

Identify what actors amplify information? In other words, who are the influencers in this space? Highlight those post-it notes.

Identify which actors you have access to currently. Mark those sticky notes with a star.