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## Gaining Systemic Insight when facing complexity

In our 2019 Annual Reflections we described the Systemic Insight process logic, a template for a process of search and discovery that we developed in Mesopartner. Process logic is aimed at partners and clients who work under conditions of uncertainty where answers are not easy to find, and exploration is needed.

Since we wrote that article, we have further developed Systemic Insight into a way of thinking and acting in situations marked by ambiguity, uncertainty



and complexity. The underlying questions it poses are: How do we gain Systemic Insight? And how do we act when we don't know what to do? The approach to gaining Systemic Insight is built around a collection of six postures that invite us to pay attention or act in different ways. The postures can either be used as a template to design a change process, or individual postures can be used to guide a continuous exploration of complex situations. We chose the term posture as it expresses a particular way of dealing with or considering something, an approach or attitude towards it. It encompasses both the outward positioning and the inner disposition that shape how individuals and organisations engage with or perceive a given circumstance. Systemic Insight can be used by individuals, teams, organisations and whole communities.

New ways of thinking about change and templates to guide people in change processes are urgently required. We live in a time when the dominant view of how change happens in the world is at odds with our new (or arguably re-gained) emerging understanding of how the world works. Much can go wrong when what we think works is not aligned with how the world actually works.

The dominant view of how change occurs is based on formulating a clear objective (an ideal future state), knowledge of the causal steps needed to close the gap between the now and the ideal future state, and the ability to plan activities and allocate resources. In contrast, our emerging understanding of how the world works paints a picture of life as a complex dynamic system that defies such linearity; a system that is entangled and dispositional rather than linear and causal. There are numerous examples of how directly fixing problems based on a linear understanding of the world has not achieved what was intended but has led to unintended consequences and more problems down the line. Yesterday's solutions are often today's problems.

We developed Systemic Insight with an understanding that change is continuous, not limited to a discreet amount of time with a clearly definable before and after. Yet there are stabilities and trajectories that we can map and explore. Shaping trajectories is about engaging relational and co-evolutionary processes between various contexts and actors.

Systemic Insight is about becoming more aware of the present and the options and opportunities

we have at our disposal now rather than in the uncertain future so that we can act collectively from where we are. The focus on the present not only unearths opportunities to explore but also allows us to adapt our perceptions and behaviours over time and to create new dynamism and new or different relationships.

While there are some six postures in Systemic Insight, it is important to note that this is not intended to be a linear process flowing through a set of activities in the sequence in which they are presented here. The medium we are using forces us to choose a sequence, and we chose the sequence below because we think it makes the most sense if somebody is at the very beginning of a process. Over time, however, all the postures will be continuously present and shape the questions you ask and the decisions you make. Postures will be more useful at certain moments as they put things into perspective that are relevant for you, while others remain more in the background for a time. Yet the full set of postures is what we think is needed for a coherent process of learning and discovery in a complex human system.

**Pause and reflect** means that you should not rush into a situation and do something for the sake of doing something. It emphasises why we are concerned about a specific issue or situation and what we bring with us that might influence how we perceive and are likely to act in a given situation. It is also about becoming aware of and naming our preferred solutions, cultural biases and blind spots. Our current understanding of knowledge in the Western world is rooted in an atomistic (composed of many simple elements)

and hierarchical philosophy of knowing, which excludes, and even suppresses, many other ways of knowing, particularly those outside of Western culture. We need to start observing ourselves and notice how we sometimes impose what we think is the right thing to do on others. This also implies that we need to be aware of whom we are referring to when we say or write “we”.

The posture of sensing the system and **discovering** what is going on puts the focus on building situational awareness while not necessarily revealing every detail of what is going on. We can map constraints, connections, exchanges, attractors, identities, habitual practices and rituals, diversity, understand roles and scripts, and capture and feel the aesthetics, the moods, the rhythms, etc. The posture invites us not to focus on a certain domain or area of

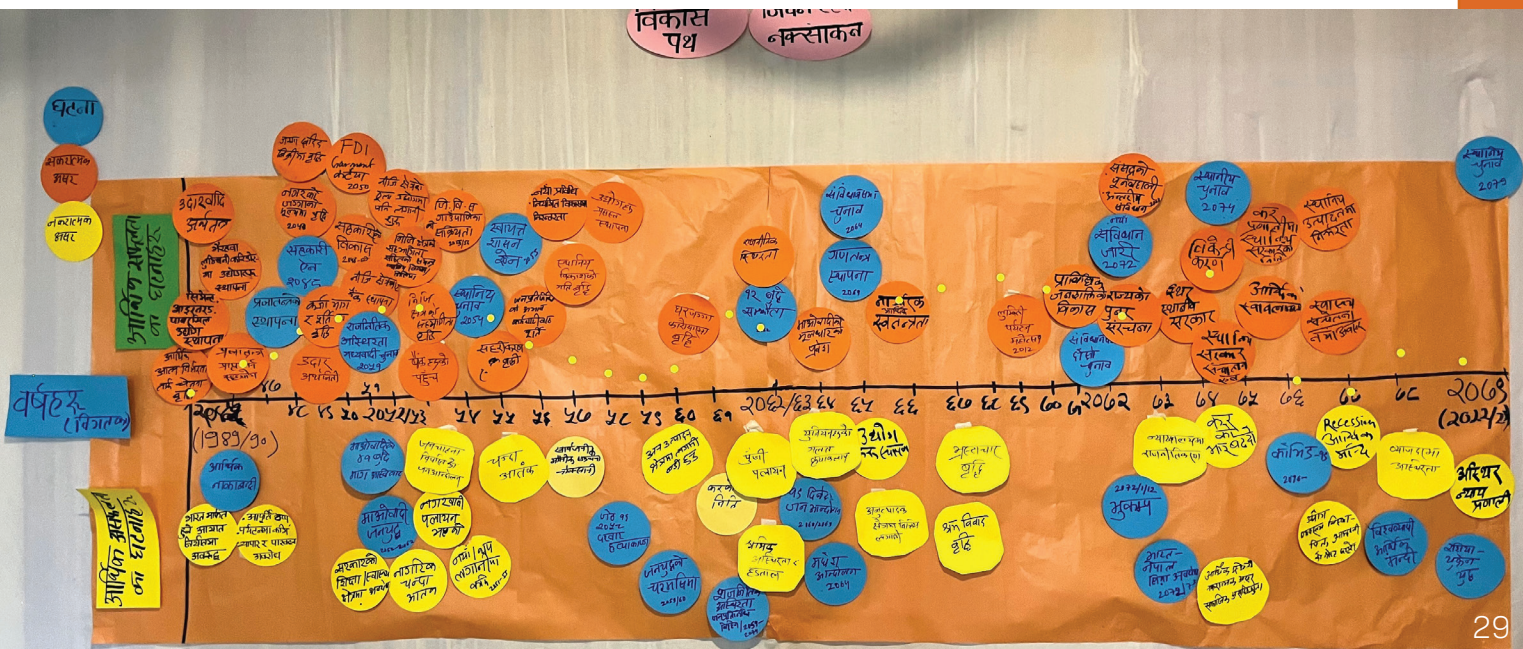


expertise but to scan as broadly as we can. At the same time, if we find a problem for which we can know all the details, we can and should apply an analytical approach to it so we can discern as much detail as possible.

**Making sense** is focusing on trying to figure out jointly what is really going on so we can act in meaningful ways. What is going on cannot be completely known, but we can calibrate in a group or team what we observe and what we think this means. We should also invite dissenting views as a form of diversifying the response to an issue or situation. We do not wish to find only one possible answer to implement but explore the range of possible answers that we might consider.

We want to get a feel for the dispositions and propensities in a system, be able to map the contributing factors and understand which factors we can influence that keep the situation in place. Sense-making can occur on several levels at the same time, leading to different but coherent responses. For example, it can be done by individuals, in local action groups, in organisations, in local and national governments, etc. Different levels will make sense in different ways, leading to different paths to be chosen. This diversity allows different things to be tried.

**Defining a direction** is a posture that focuses on figuring out what we consider to be a “better” situation than the one we see now. It is not about





describing an ideal future nor about developing a plan on how to get there. We need to get an idea of what stories we want to hear more of and what stories we want to hear less of. Defining direction is about having a broad conversation on what “better” can look like. The defining of direction also includes agreeing with other actors on what we can do together and what is desirable for all of us. However, the strategic intent is not an attempt to get everybody to agree on a specific action or plan, but to create a structure that allows a common direction of travel to emerge; a sense of direction that brings different people and organisations together on a common journey.

**Acting meaningfully with others** in a complex living system is a delicate matter. Yet we do so

all the time. Indeed, we cannot fail to influence a system we are part of. The questions to focus on through this posture are: What do we do next? How do we act based on what we know? What are different things we could try to explore in the space of the possible? We need to understand how to intervene in a complex living system. Directly fixing problems leads to unintended consequences and is generally counterproductive. Change often occurs because of a change in perception and a change in relationships. It occurs indirectly by rearranging constraints, relationships and interdependencies, not directly by changing behaviours. Possible ways to act are adaptive moves, portfolios of safe-to-fail experiments, or bringing people together in dialogue.

**Learning and adjusting** are what we need to be constantly doing; all the other postures feed into this. Learning is about monitoring and measuring change. We need to be able to assess the consequences of our actions, most importantly the unintended ones (there are always unintended actions). We need to be able to capture weak signals to react early to unintended changes. We need to amplify positive patterns and damp down negative patterns. Yet learning and adjusting are about much more than monitoring; they are about learning how to be and act together and adjust to and with each other.

For people who are new to complexity, it is most obvious that one should arrange these postures into a process sequence, starting with a reflection on their own role, then discovering to get a feel for the system. This is followed by making sense of the

overview created, asking what is really going on here. Once you have an idea of what is going on, you can develop a sense of the direction in which the various stakeholders wish to travel together and start with small, tentative joint actions to probe the system and then observe how patterns are or are not shifting. Adjusting allows us to give more attention to where it is needed or where we need to be careful as we see signs of unintended and potentially negative effects.

At a more advanced stage, you will notice that all the postures influence our way of looking at and being present in systems. We need to find time to pause and reflect, time to discover, time to make sense of what is going on, time to define the direction of travel and time to act with others. At this stage the different postures often overlap, and no obvious sequence can be defined. Learning and adjusting is a central way of being in systems, rather than just a means of getting somewhere, since a core way of understanding complex living systems is that they are fuelled by continuous mutual learning.

In Mesopartner we use this way of thinking when we approach systems and change initiatives. It has helped us to avoid jumping in and starting to fix problems and instead reflect on how the situation has evolved into the state that it is now in and what the roles of the different actors in the system are. Marshalling the right actors into a change initiative can lead to more realistic change objectives and longer-term effects that are more meaningful for the people we work with.

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