

# NCPC Summer Institute for Systems Change

## Session 3: How can you map out system root causes and prioritize where to focus your efforts?

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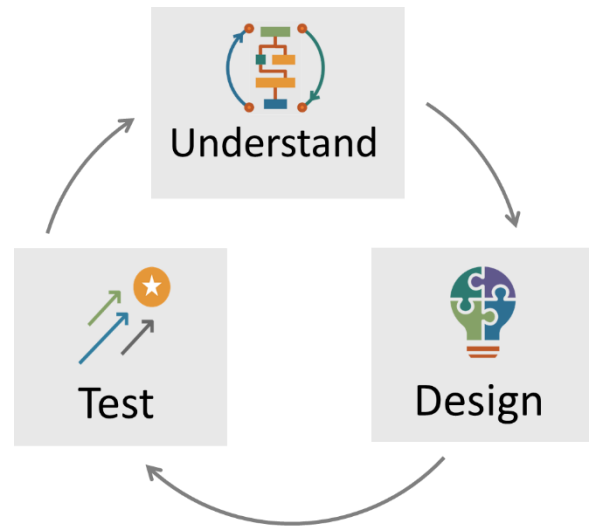
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# Introduction

There are many approaches to understand how community systems are affecting outcomes, such as community health assessment, needs assessment, etc. This session describes an approach focused on understanding *system* conditions affecting prioritized outcomes. This process can inform a larger continuous action learning cycle where groups work to:

- 1) **UNDERSTAND** system conditions or “leverage points” that are helping and hindering outcomes for children and families.
- 2) **DESIGN** strategies to amplify what is working and address what is not.
- 3) **TEST** out these strategies in real world situations.
- 4) Gather rapid/short cycle feedback to **UNDERSTAND** whether strategies are working and why, so they can be either scaled or re-**DESIGNED**.



The “Understand” phase of the action learning cycle has 3 steps.

## Understand



The last session focused on steps 1 and 2.

This session guide is focused on step 3 to support groups in mapping out themes from your ecosystem data and prioritizing where to focus for strategy design.



## Step 3: Make Sense of the Information

### How will you organize your assessment data on a rolling basis?

The following are ideas for how to compile and organize different types of assessment data as you go. Doing this on a rolling basis helps keep the process manageable.

#### Qualitative Data

Enter comments gathered from conversations or open-ended survey questions *as you receive them* into a simple spreadsheet. Add the perspective group (e.g., clinic staff, family in rural area, etc.) that provided the data at the end of each comment in parentheses. Use the tips below to enter and “clean” qualitative comments so they are ready for sense-making. See the [Data Cleaning Tips](#) for more details.

<b>Separate out different topics within the same comment</b>	People often talk about multiple issues <i>within the same comment</i> . It’s important to separate out these different ideas and issues (e.g., into separate bullet points) during sense-making because they often require very different strategies.
<b>Ensure comments are detailed enough to inform action</b>	Sometimes comments are vague and don’t include enough detail to make them actionable. If this is the case, follow up with the person who gathered the data so they can clarify the comment either from their notes or with the appropriate participant.
<b>Transfer strategy ideas to a parking lot</b>	People sometimes propose strategy ideas as they describe leverage point conditions (e.g., “ <i>we should launch a parent-led network to build the skills of local parent leaders</i> ”). If someone mentions a strategy, put a copy of the entire comment into a parking lot to use later in the strategy design process. Then, remove the strategy idea from the data point (the bit about parent-led networks) so it is just about conditions (“ <i>some parents need additional skills to engage in leadership roles within the early childhood system</i> ”).

#### Quantitative Data

Analyze any quantitative data (e.g., multiple choice survey, rating scales used in observations, inter-organizational referral tracking, etc.) you gathered or accessed to answer your assessment questions, and/or pull out any key findings from analyses that have already been done on existing databases.


Enter each main analysis finding (e.g., 45% of parents who are unable to join the workforce say it’s due to child care issues) as separate bullet points in your data summary spreadsheet. Make sure to include which survey each data point came from in these tables.

## Who will help theme your data, and how?

Make sense of the assessment data *on a rolling basis* to identify themes so you don't get stuck with a lot of work at the very end. Making sense of data on a rolling basis also allows you to figure out whether to adapt your questions over time given what you are learning. The following describes this process in more detail.

### Determine Who Will Theme the Data

Who you engage in making sense of the assessment data depends on how much time you have, and more importantly to what extent you want to build local "critical consciousness" of local issues and buy-in for action through the sense-making process. Consider the following options:

<b>Least effect on critical consciousness</b>  <b>Greatest effect on critical consciousness</b>	<b>OPTION 1:</b> Engage staff and/or an evaluator in theming all the assessment data <i>behind the scenes</i> . Get partners' input on findings and modify as needed.
	<b>OPTION 2:</b> Engage a <i>small number</i> of partners and/or assessment participants in theming some (or all depending on the size) of the assessment information. Staff or an evaluator can theme any remaining information behind the scenes and get input from regional partners and/or assessment participants.
	<b>OPTION 3:</b> Engage a <i>large number</i> of partners and/or assessment participants in theming some (or all depending on the size) of the assessment information. Staff or an evaluator can theme any remaining information behind the scenes and get input from partners and/or assessment participants.

### Identify When to Engage These Individuals

Regardless of who will be making sense of the assessment data, try to leverage existing meetings as much as possible to engage these individuals. If needed, plan for several meetings with different groups (e.g., regional partners, families, etc.) or with the same group over time.

#### EXAMPLE

<b>One Longer Meeting</b>	60-90 minute agenda item during regularly scheduled meeting with partners
<b>Series of Meetings</b>	Month 1: 25 minute agenda item during a regularly scheduled meeting Month 2: 45 minute agenda item during a regularly scheduled meeting

## Decide How to Engage People in Theming the Data

Once you identify *who* will be theming the assessment data and *when*, decide *how* to engage these individuals in the theming process. The following describes two ways to plan out this process.

### Tip: Check your Assumptions

Before engaging in sense-making, encourage participants to reflect on their assumptions about what they THINK they will find in the data, and commit to remaining open to new ideas that don't align with their assumptions. This is referred to as "Reflexivity."



If **staff or an evaluator** is theming the data...

- **SORT AND THEME DATA ON ECOSYSTEM LEVERAGE POINTS.** Enter each unique comment/data point as separate bullet points. Group bullet points about the same topic and add a **bold theme** above them.
- **GET FEEDBACK.** Get feedback from partners and/or assessment participants on the themes.



If **partners and/or assessment participants** are theming the data...

- **PLAN OUT THEMING MEETINGS.** Estimate how many people will be attending each sense-making meeting, and figure out how many small groups of about 3-5 people to form out of this number. Assign each small group a leverage point area to theme. If there are too many groups, have 2 groups theme the same data and compare their results to come to a shared set of themes.
- **PRINT DATA OR CREATE JAMBOARDS.** Print out the un-themed data points related to each leverage point area from your spreadsheet. Cut out each bullet point as separate strips of paper and put data strips related to each leverage point in labeled envelopes. OR...copy and paste the data points as separate notes in a [Jamboard](#). *OPTION: color code the data a different color for each perspective group so people can easily see patterns when they sort the data.*
- **SMALL GROUPS SORT AND THEME DATA POINTS.** Have each small group sort their assigned data strips or Jamboard notes into clusters of similar ideas, problems, or issues and create a "theme" heading for each cluster that is descriptive enough to stand on its own.

### Tips for Engaging Families in Sense-Making



**Provide some intentional training and coaching to families** *before* they engage in any theming or sense-making processes to ensure they have the skills and confidence they need to engage as full partners.

**Use separate meetings/groups for families if needed.** Depending on the skills and confidence of organizational leaders and staff to authentically and respectfully engage families as partners in these processes – it may make sense to organize separate meetings or small groups for families (while leaders and staff are building their own skills). Take care to ensure these separate meetings or groups are given the same power and legitimacy as those of organizational leaders and staff.

## How will you visually summarize the assessment themes?

One way to help people understand the assessment findings is to create a visual summary of the main themes. This visual can help to communicate the findings with partners and help them select which themes to prioritize for strategy design. There are different ways to create this visual. The following describes processes you can use to create visual summaries at lower and higher levels of intensity.

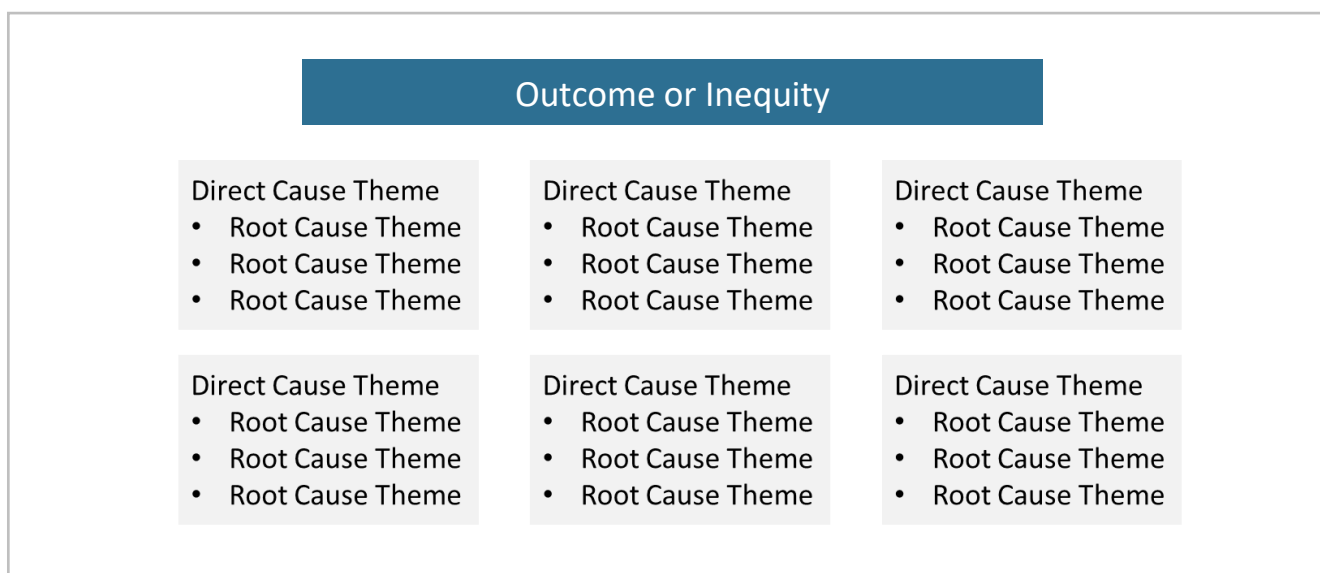
### Lower Intensity Visual: Outline

The simplest way to visually summarize your findings is to create an outline of *themes* (not data points) emerging from the assessment. This outline can make it easier to prioritize issues for strategy design.

The following is an example of a process to create an outline of the assessment themes.

1. **INSERT THE OUTCOME OR INEQUITY:** Put your outcome or inequity at the top of the page.
2. **IDENTIFY DIRECT CAUSE THEMES:** Identify the 5-7 leverage point *themes* (not data points) that are having the most powerful and direct effect on the outcome/inequity. Put each in their own box.
3. **IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSE THEMES:** Look across the remaining themes and identify which if any are directly affecting each of these direct cause themes. Insert these root cause themes as nested bullet points under the direct cause theme in each box.

### Example Outline Visual Summary



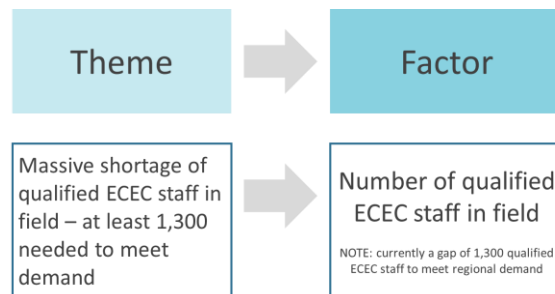
## Higher Intensity Visual: Ecosystem Map

Another way to visually summarize the assessment findings is with a more detailed system map of the main themes. Again, system maps can be helpful in determining which themes to prioritize for action because it shows how different leverage points are interacting to help and hinder your outcome or inequity.

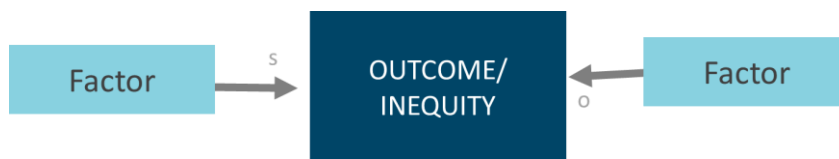
Here is an example process to create an ecosystem map visual of the assessment themes.

1. **INSERT THE OUTCOME OR INEQUITY:** Put your outcome or inequity in a box or circle somewhere on a landscape document (e.g., PowerPoint slide) or mapping software (e.g., Kumo, Miro, etc.).

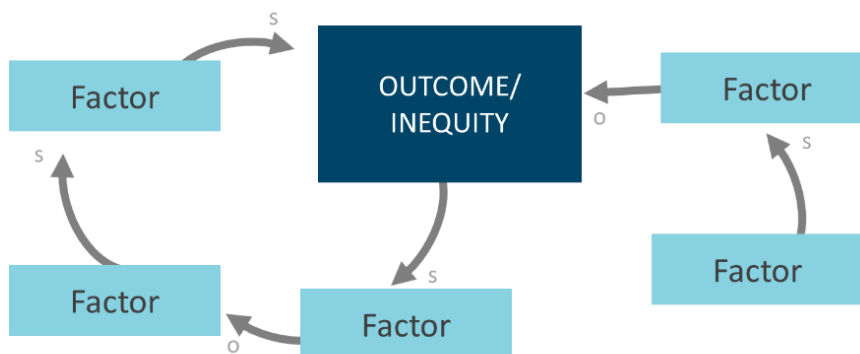
2. **TURN THEMES INTO FACTORS:** Translate the main themes from your assessment data into factors. Factors are nouns that can increase and decrease over time. See to the right for an example. Notice how you can add in notes describing the current condition of the factor.



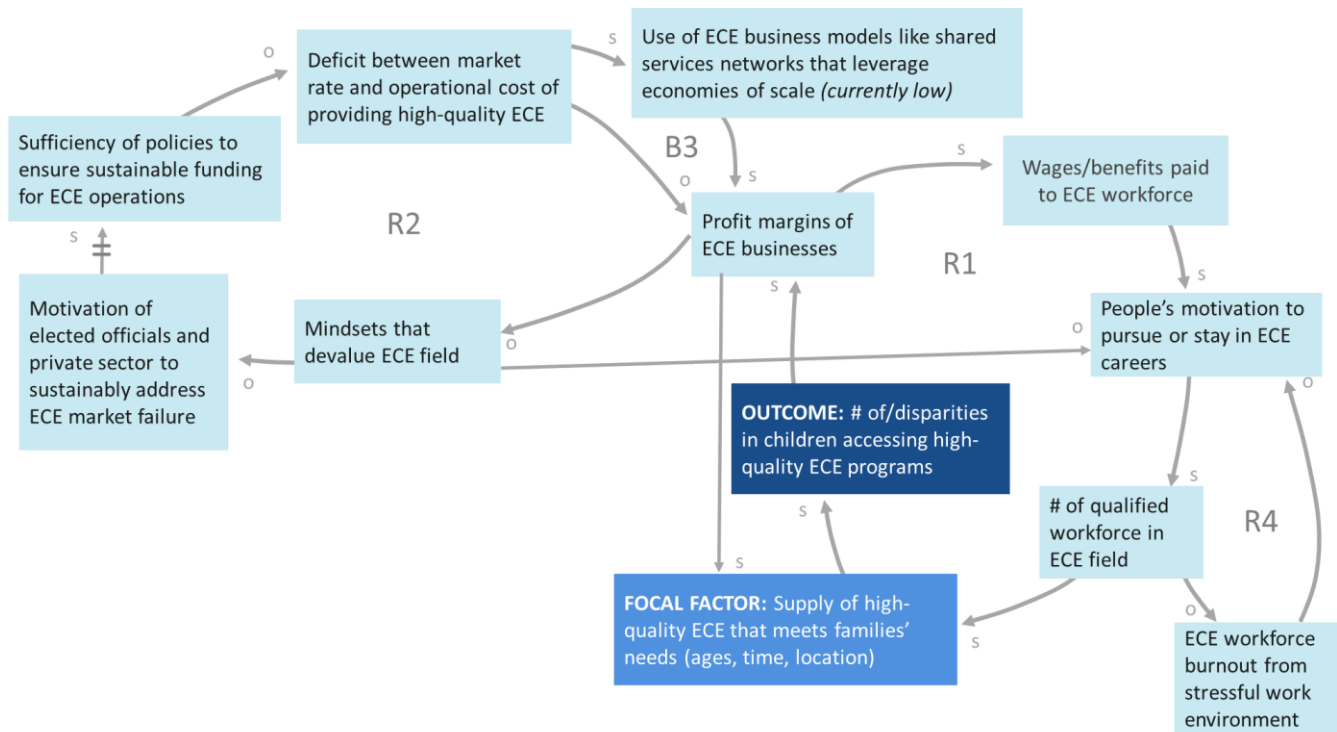
3. **MAP OUT FACTORS DIRECTLY INFLUENCING YOUR OUTCOME/INEQUITY:** Ask what leverage point themes (not data points) are having the most powerful and direct effect on the outcome or inequity. Think of this as the “core engine” driving the outcome/inequity. Put this theme or themes in boxes with arrow connecting them with the outcome/inequity box and potentially with each other. Indicate whether the connection is in the same or opposite direction. See the examples below.



4. **MAP OUT OTHER CAUSALLY CONNECTED FACTORS:** Look across the remaining theme factors and identify which are affecting this central engine of focal factors. Put these factors into separate boxes and use arrows to add in the appropriate connections.



## Example Ecosystem Map

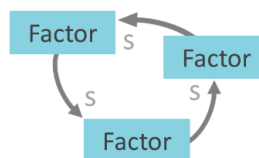


## Causal Feedback Loops

**TIP:** Indicate reinforcing and balancing loops in your visual by adding an "R" or "B" letter. In the visual above, these loops have also been numbered to help with communication.

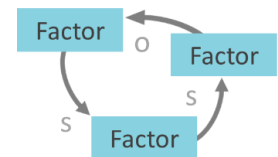
### Reinforcing Loops

Even number (or absence) of "o's"



### Balancing Loops

Odd number of "o's"



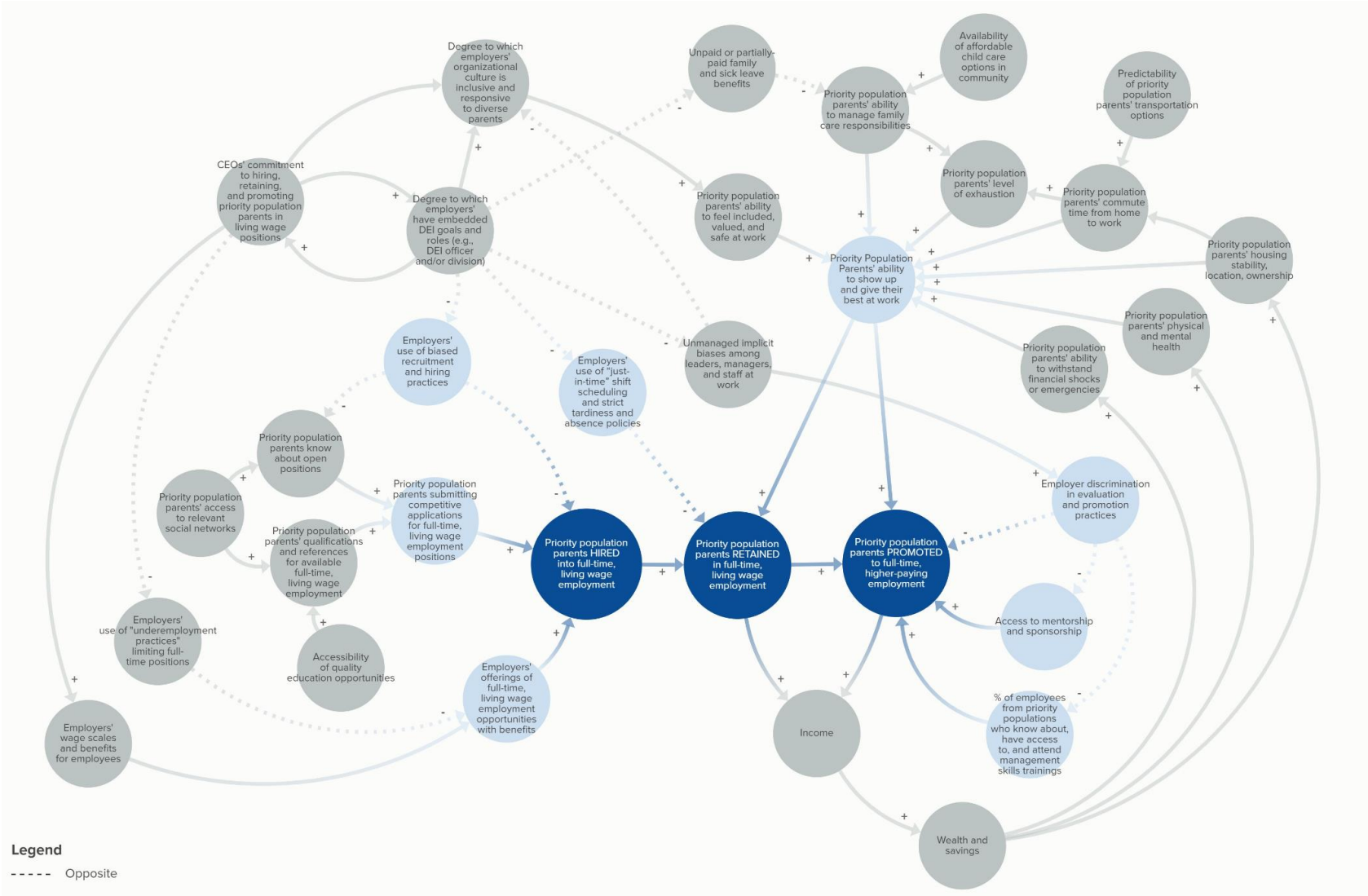
### Get feedback on your visual

Show the visual summary of your assessment themes to other partners and families in your priority population to get their feedback. Specifically, you can ask whether the visual aligns with their understanding of the situation surrounding the outcome/inequity and if there are any missing details or issues that should be added into the visual. Revise your system map as needed in response to this input.



# Example System Map of Living Wage Employment

The visual below shows an example system map of an outcome related to living wage employment. Notice how the outcome is represented by three circles (parents are hired, retained, and promoted in living wage employment). See this [webpage](#) for more details on this map.



# Which ecosystem leverage point themes will you prioritize for change?

Once you created a visual summary of the assessment themes, engage partners and families in prioritizing leverage points to design strategies around. The following provides guidance for this process.

## Prioritizing Criteria

First, ask partners how many themes they want to prioritize for strategy design *to start with*, knowing they can sequence the work over time. This number should be based on partners' current scope of work and level of engagement.

After determining the number of priorities, help partners use a prioritizing criteria to select which themes to focus on for strategy design. See below for an example.

### Example Prioritizing Criteria



Ask individuals to identify leverage point themes that:

- Have a big influence *on the situation* affecting the outcome/inequity.
  - Higher leverage points like mindsets, goals, power/decision-making, policies, and connections.
  - Strategically located in the ecosystem to disrupt or transform the status quo
- Your group can influence directly or *through partnerships*
- Can set you up to influence greater changes moving forward


## Prioritizing Process

The following is an example process you can use to engage partners in prioritizing leverage point themes for strategy design.

1. Describe the visual summary of your leverage point themes to individuals engaged in the prioritizing process. Consider giving the visual out as a handout.
2. Describe the above prioritizing criteria and see if individuals want to add any additional criteria.
3. Remind the group of the number of themes they decided to prioritize for strategy design. Have the group prioritize this many themes from the visual summary.

## How will you use the assessment process to expand collaboration?

How would you like to engage assessment participants moving forward? The following are three options from minimal to high engagement:

<b>Minimal Engagement</b>    <b>High Engagement</b>	<b>OPTION 1:</b> Providing participants with summary of assessment findings.
	<b>OPTION 2:</b> Everything above <i>and</i> inviting participants to engage in future opportunities to continue learning and strategizing around how to improve conditions affecting your outcome/inequity.
	<b>OPTION 3:</b> Everything above <i>and</i> engaging participants to become more formal members of your group.

If you are interested in options 2 or 3 above, contact assessment participants and ask them how they would like to be engaged in your efforts, what types of specific leadership roles they would like to play, and what types of support they would need to fully engage in these roles.



### Engagement Tip

You can even ask assessment participants about their interest in engaging in your efforts *while you are engaging them in your assessment methods*. Make sure to get their current contact information to connect with them.

## References

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