

Terrain Mapping For A Just Transition



*Seeking social and environmental
justice in your community: Where to begin?*

University of Toronto Scarborough

2025

Terrain Mapping for a Just Transition Toolkit

This toolkit introduces terrain mapping as an approach for making sense of the social landscapes in which we want to make change—the actors, ideas, and institutions that shape them, and the possibilities for moving them in more just and sustainable directions. Terrain mapping is not a single method but a way of bringing different forms of analysis together to build a clearer picture of what surrounds an issue and how it might be shifted.

The materials here draw from our work in the Just Transition in Action (JTIA) project, based in Scarborough, Canada, but they are meant to be useful for anyone working to connect justice and transition in their own context. Terrain mapping is especially helpful when the questions being asked are not only about individual policies or outcomes, but about who is involved, how issues are framed, and where power and resources sit.

Our aim is to offer guidance that is both practical and adaptable. What follows is not a blueprint, but a set of orientations and tools to support your own efforts to make visible the dynamics that matter, and to act on them in ways that open space for more democratic, equitable, and sustainable futures.



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Land acknowledgement

Just Transition in Action (JTIA) is a research cluster that works on the territory today known as Scarborough. Our cluster proceeds from a growing consensus that justice and equity are essential to the transformations needed to achieve zero-carbon neighbourhoods, and that urban centres will play a central role in those transformations.

As a group of heterogeneous social actors from various ethno-cultural backgrounds, including people of colonial settlers' descent, we commit to upholding social justice values. We are committed to continuing to educate ourselves and improve our practices as we engage in relationship-building and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. We wish to acknowledge the land on which we operate. This territory has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit for thousands of years. Today, this meeting place is still home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.



Just Transition in Action

Who we are

The Just Transition in Action (JTIA) project is a community-based research and action project focused on Scarborough in Toronto, Canada. We're working to understand what it takes for the community to flourish in the low-carbon transition. The Terrain Mapping project is led by researchers at the University of Toronto Scarborough to support JTIA's collective aim to rapidly accelerate low-carbon transitions in urban communities while preventing this widespread transformation from exacerbating inequalities. JTIA is led by a steering committee comprising representatives from environmental organizations, community service organizations, and academics from the University of Toronto Scarborough.

Our values

We understand that the systems that produce and perpetuate social injustice and economic inequality are the same systems that drive ecological degradation and obstruct meaningful climate action. While rapid decarbonization is necessary, we recognize that without consideration for fairness and justice, transition can

further destabilize communities and deepen existing inequalities. We are also attentive to how transition initiatives viewed as top-down or which fail to take account of the everyday reality and concerns of communities can generate significant pushback for decarbonization efforts broadly. For these reasons, we are committed to addressing climate change and social injustice together, as interconnected challenges. Doing so requires action across multiple, overlapping scales—from the local to the global—and demands new forms of solidarity, governance, and care.

The Terrain Mapping project acknowledges that a just transition to an equitable and sustainable future for the communities of Scarborough, Ontario will involve much more than technical shifts. It must be a collective reimagining of how we live and relate to one another and our environment. It will involve the redistribution of power, the repairing of historical and ongoing harms, and building the social and material conditions for all communities to enjoy a sustainable good life.

What is terrain mapping?

Terrain Mapping is a purposeful, action-oriented exercise. It can reveal where opportunities for collaboration lie, where exclusion or marginalization is happening, and where power might be built. As we will explore below, the approach can be applied to many different domains. It is especially useful for those working at the intersection of community organizing, policy, and research—or anywhere people are trying to make change together.

The aims of terrain mapping

The aim of terrain mapping is to equip those seeking change—whether they are community organizers, activists, residents, researchers, or policymakers—with a clearer understanding of the ecosystems they are working within. This means not only identifying who and what interests are present, but also recognizing who is missing, how issues are framed, and where power resides. By mapping the social, political, and institutional terrain, we create a basis for more informed, strategic, and collaborative action.

Terrain mapping is a way to make visible the people, organizations, and ideas that shape how change happens. For any specific issue, it helps identify:

- Who is involved, and who is missing
- What frames and narratives are present (or absent)
- How are those involved related to one another or not

Rather than prescribing solutions, a terrain map builds shared awareness of the landscape in which action unfolds. It is a guide for navigating power, forming alliances, and spotting gaps—always with the aim of centring justice and community priorities.

Terrain mapping helps uncover both possibilities and limitations. It reveals opportunities for alliance-building, areas of overlap or duplication, and existing capacities that can be mobilized. At the same time, it can highlight silences, exclusions, and tensions—such as the absence of equity-deserving communities in decision-making, or the dominance of technical narratives that obscure deeper structural issues.

Terrain mapping does not offer a blueprint, but a situated understanding of the social, political, and institutional ecology surrounding a particular issue. It is a tool for building collective awareness, fostering accountability, and grounding strategies for change in the realities of place. In doing so, it aims to strengthen the potential for democratic, just, and sustainable transformation.

Terrain mapping is a complementary and enabling approach to research. Drawing together established qualitative research approaches, including discourse and policy analysis, media and content analysis, social network and stakeholder analysis, and asset/community mapping, terrain mapping is a purpose-driven approach that seeks to empower those seeking social, economic, and political transformation.

Getting started: Questions

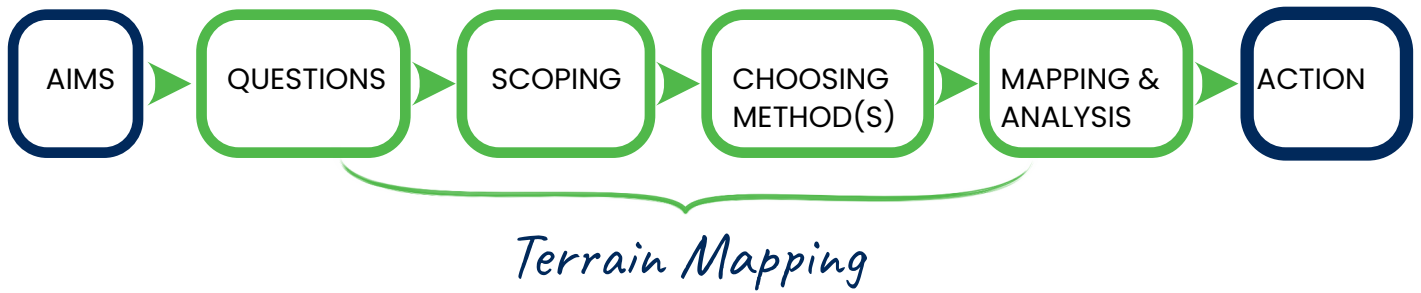
Your approach to terrain mapping will be driven by your aims which in turn will shape the questions you ask. Your aims may be arrived at in any number of ways, from community workshops to listening methods. Likewise, the implications of your findings and the actions you take to pursue change will be driven by a range of factors, from social context to available resources. Terrain mapping encompasses the space between generating aims and taking action. It includes research questions, scoping, choosing methods, and map generation and analysis.

The goal of terrain mapping is to equip communities, organizers, and decision-makers with a map that supports collective action.

- **Understanding** – build a common understanding of the landscape
- **Equity** – highlight who and what is missing or excluded
- **Collaboration** – reveal opportunities for coalition and building-power
- **Strategy** – identify leverage points and pathways for change

A terrain map is not a blueprint—it is a living tool to support changemaking.

FROM AIMS TO ACTION WITH TERRAIN MAPPING

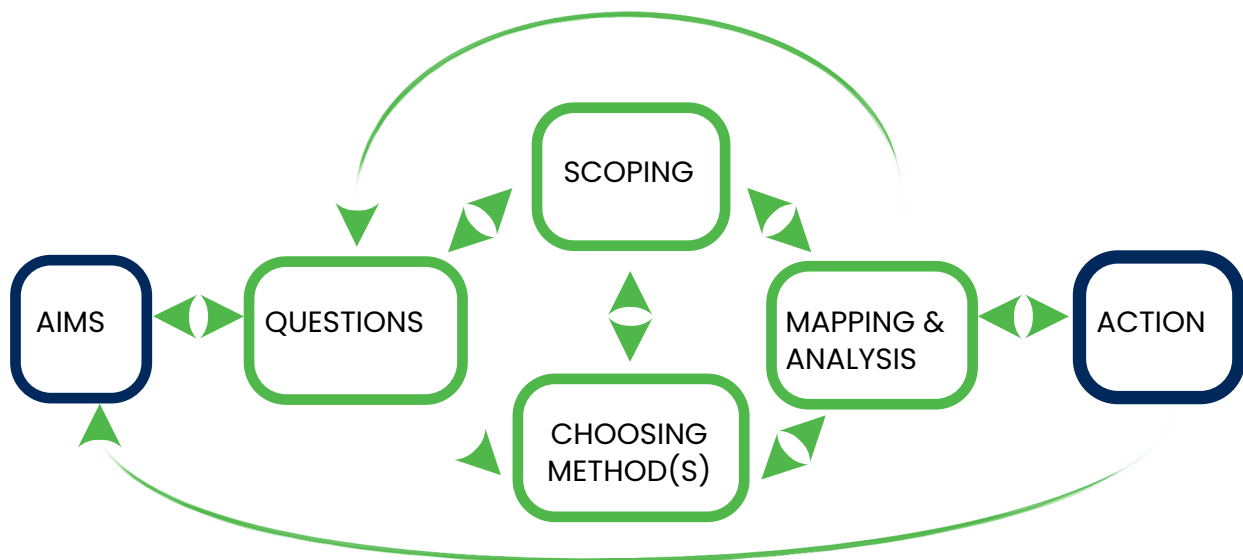


Terrain mapping methods are especially useful when your questions are concerned with how an issue is understood, who is involved, and where are the openings and obstacles to change. Such methods are a good fit when you are asking things like:

- Who is involved in shaping this issue, and who is missing?
- How are ideas about this issue framed, and what narratives dominate?
- How are different actors and organizations connected—or not?
- Where do power, resources, or authority sit, and how are they contested?
- What opportunities or obstacles exist for coalition-building or change?

If these are the kinds of questions you are wrestling with, then terrain mapping can provide a structured way to make the answers visible and actionable.

It is important to note that the above diagram is an abstracted image of terrain mapping, and like all snapshots of complex processes, the actual experience of conducting research is much more nuanced and “messy.” Terrain mapping, like all purpose-driven research, is almost never linear. As we begin to understand more, it is common to revisit a prior stage—often multiple times. Although we always want to keep momentum moving toward action, learning is a process of fits and starts, anticipate and plan to revise “prior” stages of research. Your process is much more likely to look something like the image below image than the one above:



Our experience with research questions

When we began our project, our first task was to clarify the kinds of questions we wanted to ask. It was never our intent to test a single hypothesis, but to understand and build picture of how just transition was being understood and acted on in Scarborough. Hence, our guiding questions were intentionally broad: How is just transition being articulated by actors and institutions? Who is active in key areas? What relations connect them? These questions were refined through discussion with JTIA partners, as well as through trial and error. We found that asking broad, open-ended questions

helped to surface unexpected connections and gaps. At the same time, it was important to resist the temptation to ask everything at once. Settling on a few orienting questions gave us a foundation to work from, while leaving room to adjust as new themes and insights emerged. For instance, while analyzing our findings on how just transition is understood, a question that did not occur to us to ask earlier was who was silent on the subject that we might expect to have an interest, leading to important insights about both marginalization within as well as resistance to just transition discourse.

Scoping your map

Once you have your aims and guiding questions, the next step is to scope your map. Scoping is about setting intentional boundaries so your work is focused and feasible, while still leaving room for unexpected connections. It means deciding which issues, actors, places, kinds of terrain, and time periods are most relevant to your goals. Good scoping ensures that your map is both manageable and meaningful, helping you balance clarity with openness.

Important considerations when scoping for terrain mapping are:

Issue – What specific issue(s) are you interested in? Climate jobs? Housing retrofits? Food security? Naming an issue helps guide your mapping, but remember that issues are connected, and your map may reveal new intersections.

Key considerations:

- Clarify whether you are focusing on a single issue (e.g., housing retrofits) or multiple (e.g., housing, energy, and mobility). Single-issue maps are simpler and more focused, while multi-issue maps can highlight intersections and synergies, but are more resource-intensive.
- Be mindful of language: different actors may use different terms for the same issue. Decide whether to map around one term or include multiple.
- Recognize that issues rarely exist in isolation—mapping one will often surface links to others. Build flexibility to capture these intersections.

Actors – Who and what kind of actors are shaping the issue and terrain you are interested in? Clarify who or what organizations is to be included in your analysis.

Key considerations:

- Formal categories (e.g., government agencies, NGOs, industry groups) may leave out informal actors, grassroots networks, or marginalized voices.
- Ask explicitly: who is missing, and why? Consider structural barriers that limit participation (e.g., lack of resources, language access, political exclusion).
- Remember that actors do more than “participate”—they shape narratives, mobilize resources, and influence decisions in different ways.

Location – What geographic area matters for your work? A neighbourhood, city, or region?

Key considerations:

- Boundaries can be drawn in many ways: political (e.g., municipal wards), social (e.g., communities of identity), or physical (e.g., watershed). Choose what fits your aims. Keep in mind that formal borders may not reflect how people actually experience or navigate their communities.
- Consider how multiple scales interact: neighbourhood, city, province, nation, global. Issues are often shaped across levels of governance simultaneously.
- Be clear about where you draw your boundaries, while acknowledging connections that extend beyond them and shape the local terrain (e.g., supply chains, international agreements, cultural and economic forces).

Kind of terrain – Are you focusing on discourses, organizational networks, community priorities, or a combination? Clarify what you want to make visible.

Key considerations:

- Using more than one kind of mapping can enrich your picture, but will also add complexity and require more resources.
- Be clear about why you are mapping a particular kind of terrain—does it match your aims? For example, if you want to influence public debate, discursive mapping may be most relevant; if you want to build coalitions, organizational or network mapping may be more useful.
- Remember that terrains overlap: organizations produce discourses, communities shape and contest them, and ideas travel across spaces. Stay open to connections that blur neat categories.

Timeframe – What period matters? Current debates? The last five years of policy? Historical trajectories?

Key considerations:

- Decide whether you want a snapshot (e.g., the current terrain) or a longer trajectory (i.e., how the terrain has shifted over time).
- Shorter time frames are easier to capture and useful for understanding the present moment, but may miss important context. Longer time frames can show patterns of change, continuity, or recurring tensions, but require more effort and often more data sources.
- Consider aligning the time frame with key events (e.g., a new policy, a major community mobilization, a climate agreement) rather than arbitrary dates.
- Be explicit about the limits of your chosen period—acknowledge what comes before or after, even if it falls outside the scope of your map.

TIPS FOR SCOPING

- Check in with other people in the relevant issue space from start to finish to get insight and feedback
- Clarify what the map will be used for (internal reflection, coalition-building, advocacy, education). Purpose will shape choices across the other categories
- Consider from the outset whether the map is a one-off snapshot or a living tool to be updated
- Move through your envisioned process of change from beginning to end, asking “who/what is involved at each step?”
- Think creatively and empathetically to ensure you capture the full range of welcoming, uneven, and adverse terrain
- Always ask, “who/what am I missing?”
- Start small and scale up as needed and as resources allow

Scoping is not about drawing rigid lines, but about making choices that fit your aims and resources. The most useful maps are grounded enough to guide action, yet flexible enough to reveal new actors, ideas, and relations along the way.

Our experience with scoping

Scoping was both one of the most practical and one of the most contested parts of our work. We learned that scoping cannot be a rigid exercise. In our experience exploring the organizations pertinent to a just transition in Scarborough, we decided to first narrow our focus by centring on specific issue areas: energy, mobility, housing, and food. We chose this approach for both practical and theoretical reasons. By choosing specific areas of focus, rather than trying to encompass all the possible sectors that require change to pursue decarbonization and justice, we were able to match our focus to the existing knowledge and experience base of those involved in the research and the time and resources available to them.

However, choosing the broad areas of interest was only the beginning. Further scoping questions continued to emerge throughout the mapping process. One important decision point concerned whether and under what conditions to include organizations that have mandates or operate beyond Scarborough at provincial, national, or international scales but will nevertheless be important to pursuing just transition in the community, such as provincial and federal ministries, national eNGOs and unions. We decided to include those that “touched down” in Scarborough in

some way, which for us meant that because provincial and federal ministry’s had jurisdiction in Scarborough, or could otherwise influence what happens in the community, they were included, while it was determined that only those unions with a presence (i.e., a local) in the community would be included. A similar dynamic played out as we scoped our discourse analysis project looking at how just transition is articulated and understood by actors relevant to Scarborough.

Ultimately, the biggest lesson of our experience with scoping is that it is necessarily an evergreen process which will be revisited and revised as a project develops. Because all projects have some resource constraints, there will always be things we leave out—the key is to ensure that the inclusionary criteria are intentional and thoughtful and avoid arbitrariness. Sometimes this may mean revising our questions to ensure we can complete the work necessary to answer them. At all times it means recognizing what is left out and opening a door for future researchers to walk through and fill the gaps we leave. In our case, for example, this includes the many other issue areas we left unaddressed in our organizational mapping project such as waste and recycling or water management.

Methods for terrain mapping: A menu

There is no single way to do terrain mapping. Instead, it is a family of methods that can be adapted depending on your aims, questions, and scope. The methods outlined here are not exhaustive, but they provide practical starting points for exploring different aspects of a terrain. In many cases, combining methods can generate the richest insights. For example, discourse analysis can reveal how an issue is framed, while organizational mapping can show who is active and how they connect. Used together, they make visible both the ideas and the actors shaping change.

Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of terrain mapping methods*:

1. Discursive — Here we are primarily interested in how an issue is framed or defined and thought about (including what cause(s) and solution(s) are discussed), what other ideas and issues its connected to, and what visions of the future and worldviews are shaping these discussions.

Relevant methods include: Discourse, narrative, and frame analysis methods

2. Stakeholder and relational — Here we are primarily interested in who is currently involved with a particular issue, who might be involved in addressing it given our aims, and how they are connected.

Relevant methods include: Organizational field, stakeholder and network analysis methods

3. Community — Here we are primarily interested in what priorities members of a community have, how they think about and understand a particular issue, what their vision for the future is, and what resources are currently available.

Relevant methods include: Listening, asset or resource flow methods

The lines between each of these methods is not hard and fast, and they are often best used in conjunction with one another depending on your question and the aims of your work.

* In this toolkit we deal with the first two kinds of terrain mapping. or more information and guidance on Community Mapping, please see our companion toolkit on Listening.

Let Your Questions Guide You!

IF YOU ASK...

...THEN...

...YOU MIGHT ADOPT A...

What are people saying about this issue?

Discourse or narrative analysis

How is the issue currently defined or framed?

Frame analysis

Who is currently working on this issue?

Organizational field or network analysis

Who would need to be involved to achieve the change we seek?

Stakeholder or network analysis

How are different actors connected or not?

Organizational field or network analysis

What role does the government play?

Policy or institutional analysis

How does this issue intersect with others?

Cross-issue discourse, framing, organizational, or network analysis

DISCURSIVE METHODS

These approaches focus on how issues are talked about and understood. They are especially useful when you want to know what is being said, how it is being said, and what that makes possible or impossible.

- **Discourse analysis** looks systematically at texts (such as policies, reports, media, or organizational statements) to identify patterns in language. This might involve asking: How are problems defined? What solutions are put forward? Whose voices are centred or marginalized? Researchers often code texts to track recurring themes, terms, or silences, then analyze how these shape the politics of an issue.
- **Narrative analysis** pays attention to the stories told about an issue. For example, is transition described as a heroic struggle, a technical challenge, or a community journey? Narrative analysis identifies the plots, characters, and arcs that frame how people understand what is at stake. This can involve close reading of speeches, interviews, or community stories, highlighting the narrative devices and structures that shape meaning.
- **Framing analysis** identifies the interpretive frames that actors use to make sense of an issue (e.g., “crisis,” “opportunity,” “burden”). Frames matter because they mobilize some responses and foreclose others. Framing analysis often involves coding documents, media, or interviews for particular ways of presenting problems and solutions, and then comparing across sources to see which frames dominate.

Together, these methods help reveal the *contours of debate*: what is visible, what is silenced, and what visions of the future are being advanced. They can be applied alone or in combination, and often involve building a dataset of texts, systematically coding them, and synthesizing findings into patterns of meaning.

STAKEHOLDER AND RELATIONAL METHODS

These methods focus on who the relevant actors are, what roles they play, and how they are connected. They are especially helpful for understanding the ecosystem of organizations, institutions, and individuals active in a space.

- **Stakeholder analysis** identifies and categorizes actors in terms of their interests, positions, and influence. This often involves listing stakeholders, then assessing their level of power and alignment with the issue at hand.
- **Institutional analysis** looks at the formal structures that shape how actors operate—laws, mandates, governance arrangements, and policies. This can be done by reviewing official documents and mapping decision-making processes.
- **Organizational field analysis** treats organizations as part of a wider field (e.g., the energy sector, food system, or housing landscape) and looks at how they relate to one another. This might include classifying organizations by type, sector, or scale and examining patterns of similarity and difference.
- **Social and policy network analysis** maps ties between actors, often using surveys, interviews, or document analysis to trace collaborations, partnerships, or influence. These ties can then be visualized to show clusters, central players, and gaps.
- **Resource flow mapping** tracks how money, expertise, or materials move across a system. For example, mapping who funds whom, or how resources are allocated across organizations and communities.

These methods are usually carried out by collecting information from organizational documents, websites, or public records, and sometimes by interviewing participants. The outputs often include charts or diagrams that show *who is in the field, how they relate, and where resources or authority concentrate*.

Advice for future social cartographers:

- **Seek advice and input** – Consult people with knowledge of the issue space to strengthen accuracy and relevance.
- **Combine methods when appropriate/possible** – The boundaries between methods are not rigid. In the same study, you may choose to combine methods to get a more fulsome picture, such as stakeholder analysis and organizational field analysis.
- **Look for overlaps and clusters** – If you are using more than one kind of mapping, pay attention to where they intersect. Overlaps between clusters of actors, discourses, or resources can reveal important dynamics.
- **Keep an open mind** – Try to beware of your biases (we all have them!). Do not only look for or map likeminded organizations or narratives. Casting a wide net, and thinking creatively, helps avoid blind spots and surfaces unexpected relations.
- **Notice the absences** – Just as important as what is present are the empty spaces: the actors not engaged, the communities left out, or the frames not being used. Absence is itself meaningful.

Our experience with methods

In practice, our terrain mapping drew most heavily on two types of methods: discursive analysis and organizational mapping. Although we did not immediately identify our work as discourse analysis, previously looking at it from a policy perspective amongst other ways of approaching it, we chose discourse analysis because it best matched with our question concerning how just transition is understood by actors relevant to Scarborough.

To conduct our discourse analysis, we assembled a dataset of policy documents, consultation reports, and other texts published by actors with a connection to Scarborough that explicitly addressed the concept of just transition. To distill patterns and tendencies in how just transition was understood, we first coded the documents according to a variety of attributes, including what kind of organization published the document, the date of its release, and its intended audience and purpose. We then coded the content of the documents according to a framework meant to capture how narrow and focused or broad and encompassing just transition was framed and how. The framework itself was developed through an iterative

process that began by drawing on existing frameworks and evolved after an initial round of coding and learning more about the varied and complex ways the concept of just transition was used in our sample of documents.

Our experience shows that although the method(s) we choose often appear natural in hindsight they are frequently anything but as we work our way from our initial questions through to analysis and beyond. Our experience also reinforced the idea that each “phase” of research is intimately tied to another and not necessarily sequential. Having chosen our discourse analysis method and begun the process of developing a framework for analysis, questions of scope reemerged as the need to determine the boundaries of that discourse in a way that both ensured we could respond to our driving questions and was feasible given our constraints became real.

Parting words

Terrain mapping is meant to be practical and flexible. As you design and use your map, a few considerations may help ensure it remains useful over time:

Future proofing – Think of your map as something that can grow. Allow for the possibility of enlarging its scope or updating it as new actors, narratives, or dynamics emerge. Treat it as a living tool rather than a one-off snapshot. Even if you do not plan to use it again, it may be the basis from which someone else works to build their own.

Sharing and access – Decide early on whether your map is for internal use, for a specific coalition, or for wider public sharing. Each option brings different benefits and risks. A potential strategy to minimize risk is to share only portions of the map or anonymize certain sections by replacing specific organizations, individuals, language, etc. with more general categories.

Anchoring in vision – A map is most powerful when it is informed by a shared vision of the future you are working toward. Terrain mapping is a great approach to complement coproductive methods of generating aims and questions.

FROM MAPPING TO ACTION IN FOUR MOVES

- **See the field** – Share the maps with partners to build a common picture of who/what is in play.
- **Find the gaps** – Identify missing communities, weak ties, and over-represented narratives.
- **Identify allies** – Look for potential areas of mutual interest, make connections, forge alliances, and build power in coalition.
- **Iterate and evolve** – Update with community contributions; treat the map as an organizing and research tool, not a static picture.

Acknowledgements

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Credit

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