Political Ecologies of Food, Farming and Capitalism

Concept Mapping

Concept mapping is a strategy for visually representing the **Issues, Actors** and **Causal Relations** of an ecological problem. It also facilitates the identification of **Strategic Points of Intervention** and helps to assess the political terrain within which interventions are pursued. Concretely it consists of boxes and connecting arrows that identify and relate these 4 factors. To build a map you first need to identify the **core problem** that drives the broader set of questions or objectives that you want to address. Identifying that core problem is essential as conceptually it gives direction to your work and pragmatically it orients your intervention design. Concept mapping takes the core problem and works through the following questions:
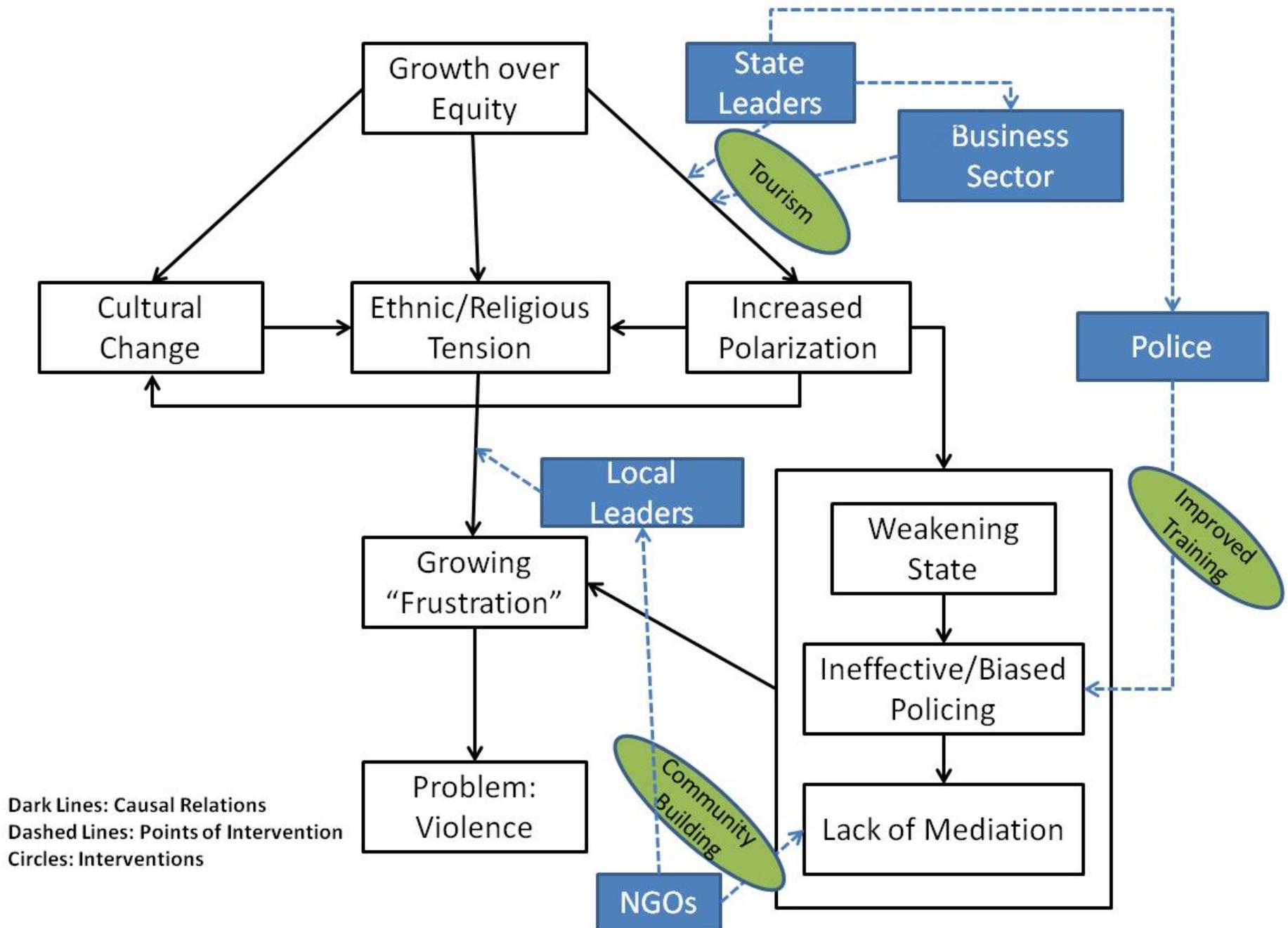
1. *What are the primary structuring **issues**?* Issues include big picture stuff: erosion, climate change, pollution, industrial production, consumerism, etc. But they also include factors specific to cases: food deserts, government policies, local climatology, local factors of production, etc. Use what you've learned in your course work, life experience, etc., to identify how this problem is created and sustained. But you also need to include the consequences of your key problem, that is, the outcomes that in fact make it a problem. What specifically are the consequences of this problem for the region or population you're interested in? In short, your problem is shaped by and in turn shapes issues and you need to consider both sets of relations.   Write a list of all relevant issues (though as you move forward you may discard some and add others as you clarify what it is you are doing). Each of these will be a box in your diagram.

2. *What are the **causal relations** between the issues?* This is where you draw arrows between boxes. The direction, weight and form of the arrows signify a causal argument or claim. For example, states structure individual action through many institutional mechanisms so you might draw a thick, solid arrow going from state to citizen. Or you might have different institutions (education, military, etc.) which, depending on your problem might have more or less significance, so you might have a heavier or thicker arrow going from one than from another. But citizens structure states too, though generally they aren't able to do so in as direct a fashion as states to citizens. So the arrow from citizen to state might pass through political parties and representatives, or be a dashed line instead of a solid one to represent an indirect or attenuated causal relation rather than a direct or strong one. In this way you can start to give different weights to causal relations. This process will take several drafts because too many boxes and arrows make a map unreadable. The iterative process of re-drawing is ultimately what will clarify your thinking to yourself and generate a map that a reader can use to understand the essential factors that are shaping your approach to addressing the core problem.

3. *Where are the **strategic points of intervention***? Within this image of boxes and arrows there are points of attack, nodal points that, if they can be changed, will have ramifying consequences. For example, will you try to turn that dashed arrow from citizens to state into a solid one, e.g., through a political mobilization project? If low food security is a consequence of both low food availability and low income, which is more causally significant? But also, which is easier to attack? Where would the resources that are available for the intervention project (both human and material) be most effectively deployed? So, e.g., maybe income is what needs to be addressed but food availability is what you can feasibly address. Though it can be demoralizing to see how small an intervention is relative to the scale of the problem you have mapped, nevertheless recognizing these limitations will clarify to yourself and your collaborators both the strengths and limitations of your approach. But there is an additional benefit. Unless they've been conceptualized with such a degree of specificity that very few have any stake, ecological problems are problems for many people. Because of this there are almost always other actions underway. The process of identifying points of intervention will help you to identify potential allies who are attacking the problem at the same or other points of intervention. Can you coordinate or work in parallel with them so as to maximize the collective effect? For that matter are there other actors and projects that are potential antagonists, or even enemies, to you and your work? Where are their points of attack on the issue? All these points of intervention will be triangles in the map.

4. *Who are the **actors***? Governments, industry lobbies, citizens, organizations, individuals such as yourself, etc. The list of actors can go on and on, so identify the key ones: those who have a heavy impact on, or are affected by, the problem and its structuring factors; who are affected by or should be involved in the points of intervention; and those who are or can be involved in your own project. How specifically do they affect or are affected by the issues and each other? These will be circles which you can integrate into the map in relation to the causal argument you have built around the issues and in particular in relation to the points of intervention.

The instructions above are a template, not rules. For example, squares, circles and triangles are just one convention; you can be creative and come up with your own strategies for building a visual argument about the core problem your project addresses (the sample maps below for example have their own variations). The most important thing is that you use the process of constructing a map as a vehicle for clarifying and focusing your thinking so that you can both be strategic in your planning and have an effective tool for communicating your ideas to others.

Chris London, 22 February 2017

"Ethnic Violence" in South Lampung

Growth over Equity

State Leaders

Business Sector

Tourism

Cultural Change

Ethnic/Religious Tension

Increased Polarization

Police

Local Leaders

Growing "Frustration"

Weakening State

Improved Training

Community Building

Problem: Violence

Ineffective/Biased Policing

Lack of Mediation

NGOs

Dark Lines: Causal Relations
Dashed Lines: Points of Intervention
Circles: Interventions

La Merced IFP 2014

Core Problem: Underdeveloped food identity

Analysis

Lack of strategic planning in tourism

Informal/inconsistent local food system

Competition from urban centers (price and quality variation)

Individualistic approach/distrust in the community

History of Monoculture (coffee)

Weak tourism strategy

Lack of knowledge on supply and demand

Lack of working together

Post-conflict tension

Reluctance to diversify

Low profit/ yields for local sales

Local food is more expensive

Actions

Conduct Demand analysis

Strengthen tourism identity and branding

Promote Collaboration

Actors

Tourists

Asprocafem

Comité de Cafeteros/Fe decafé

Tourism Association

Alcaldía

Local purchasers (grocers/restaurants)

UMATA

Small producers

SENA

Fresa team

Community leaders

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