

Summary

“Systems mapping” encompasses various graphical techniques that help us to think through our mental model of a system, increase our understanding of a system, and communicate our knowledge to others.¹ A causal loop diagram is just one type of systems map, but an especially useful one, because it captures the feedback loops that constitute the basic structure of the system and shape its key behaviours. Causal loop diagrams (CLDs) do not require any specialized knowledge but can be counter-intuitive in some respects. This handbook explains how to read and draw causal loop diagrams, clarifies some common sources of confusion, and offers advice for using this tool most effectively.

Like many other forms of systems diagrams (and network diagrams), CLDs are composed of elements and connections. But unlike many others, CLDs also include feedback loops that connect elements in a circular pattern. This handbook explains each of these three features, provides step-by-step instructions for drawing CLDs, then presents three examples of CLDs that elucidate crucial real-world phenomena.

¹ For an excellent survey of different system mapping techniques, see: Barbrook-Johnson and Penn, 2022, in the Recommended Resources section below.