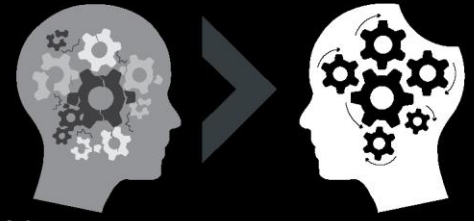


Moving the Middle

Empowering rural land managers to act in complex landscapes



EXPLAINER

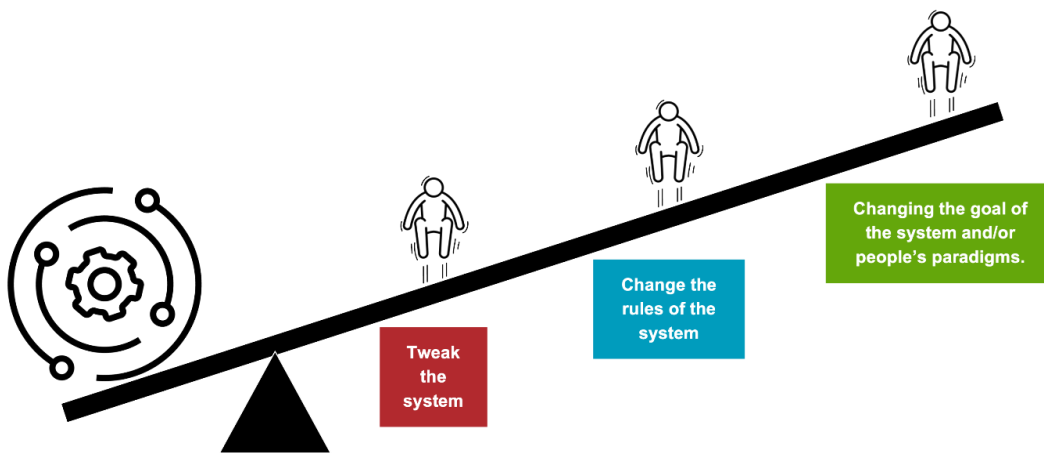
Oct 2024

Systems thinking and leverage points

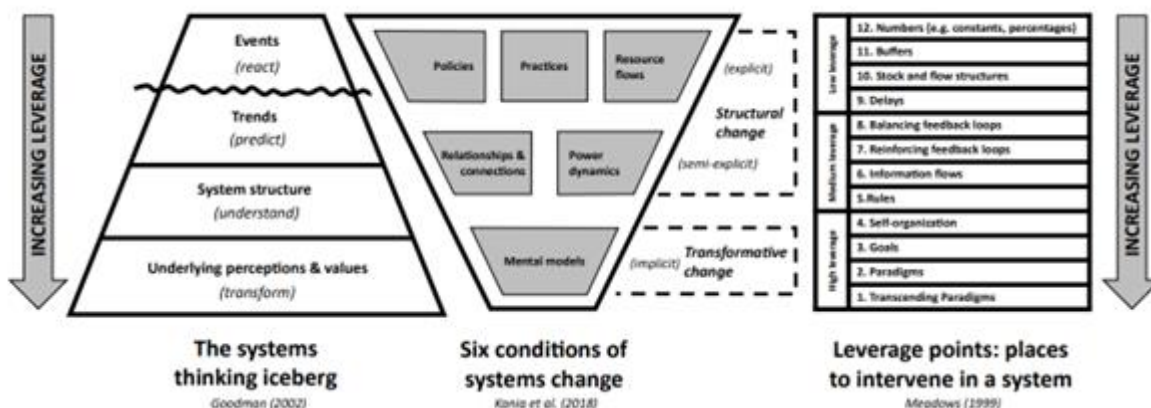
SYSTEMS THINKING AND LEVERAGE POINTS ARE USEFUL FOR THINKING ABOUT CHANGE

Systems thinking is a way of making sense of the complexity of the world by looking at it in terms of wholes and relationships rather than by splitting it down into its component parts. Boundaries are important in Systems Thinking. The Moving the Middle programme is aimed at interventions off the land or beyond the farm boundary that impact on the willingness and ability to act of those on the land, so the programme boundaries are much bigger than farm or land parcel boundaries. In Agents of Change we are looking at the environment/agriculture/social system impacting on land in Aotearoa.

The notion of leverage points in systems thinking is that intervening at different places in a system have different potentials for change. For example, intervening in the green box has more potential power to make bigger change in the system on the left-hand side than intervening in the red box.



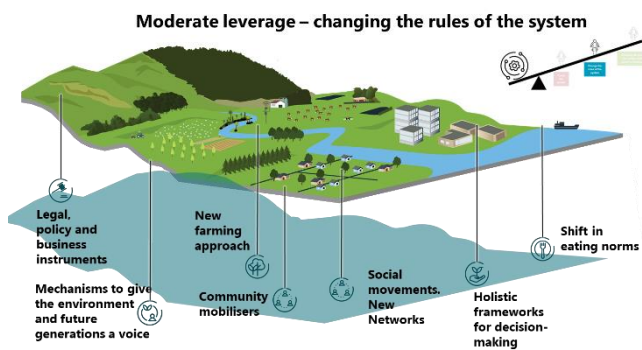
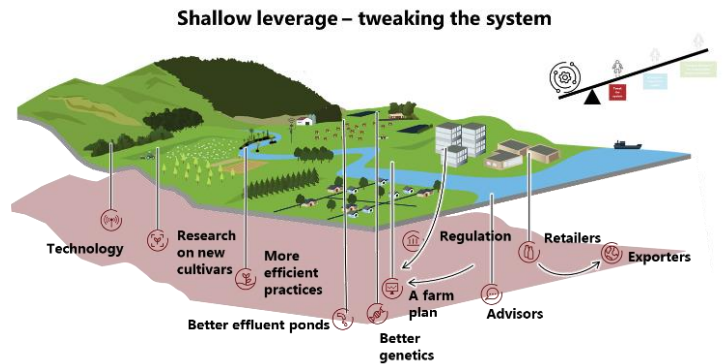
Leverage points can be described as occurring at shallower, moderate and deeper leverage levels, but are conceptualised in other ways too:



CHARACTERISING AGENTS OF CHANGE BY LEVERAGE POINTS

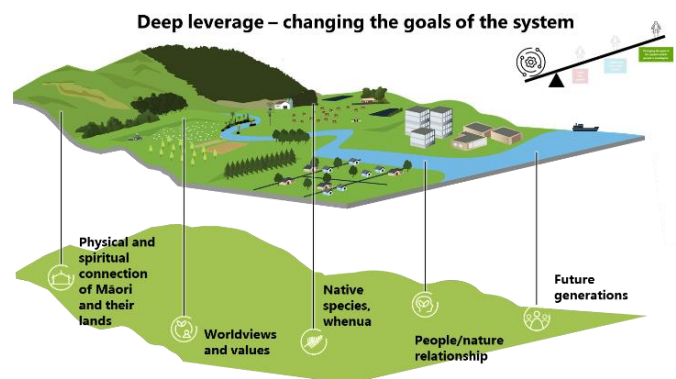
Here we give some examples of the leverage points that different agents of change might target.

At the shallower leverage levels agents are targeting changes such as increasing efficiency or changing rates, for example increase the efficiency¹ of an irrigation practice or change the rate of fertiliser application. With shallower interventions the fundamental structure and goals of the system remain the same. These interventions tend to be direct, transparent, and can often happen relatively quickly, and can be highly effective for small changes.



At moderate leverage levels agents are trying to change the rules of the system, and as a result the system structure. They might do this through creating new ways of doing things, new information flows, or new networks and relationships which in turn start to create new system structures. If effective, these interventions are capable of bringing about more significant change than shallower interventions as they impact on the system structure and rules.

At deep leverage levels agents are trying to change the purpose or goal of the system often by trying to target the mindsets or mental models and ways of seeing the world that have created the existing system. These interventions are more values-based and relational, but they may be less obvious, less direct and often difficult to influence. However, because they aim at the system goals and purpose, they are capable of bringing about significant systems change if they are effective.



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¹ With efficiency-based interventions there is the risk of Jevons Paradox occurring. The Jevons paradox is an economic phenomenon that occurs when an increase in the efficiency of using a resource leads to an increase in the overall demand for that resource.