



Systems  
Thinking  
**Alliance**

# Visualizing Complexity: Using Rich Pictures in Practice

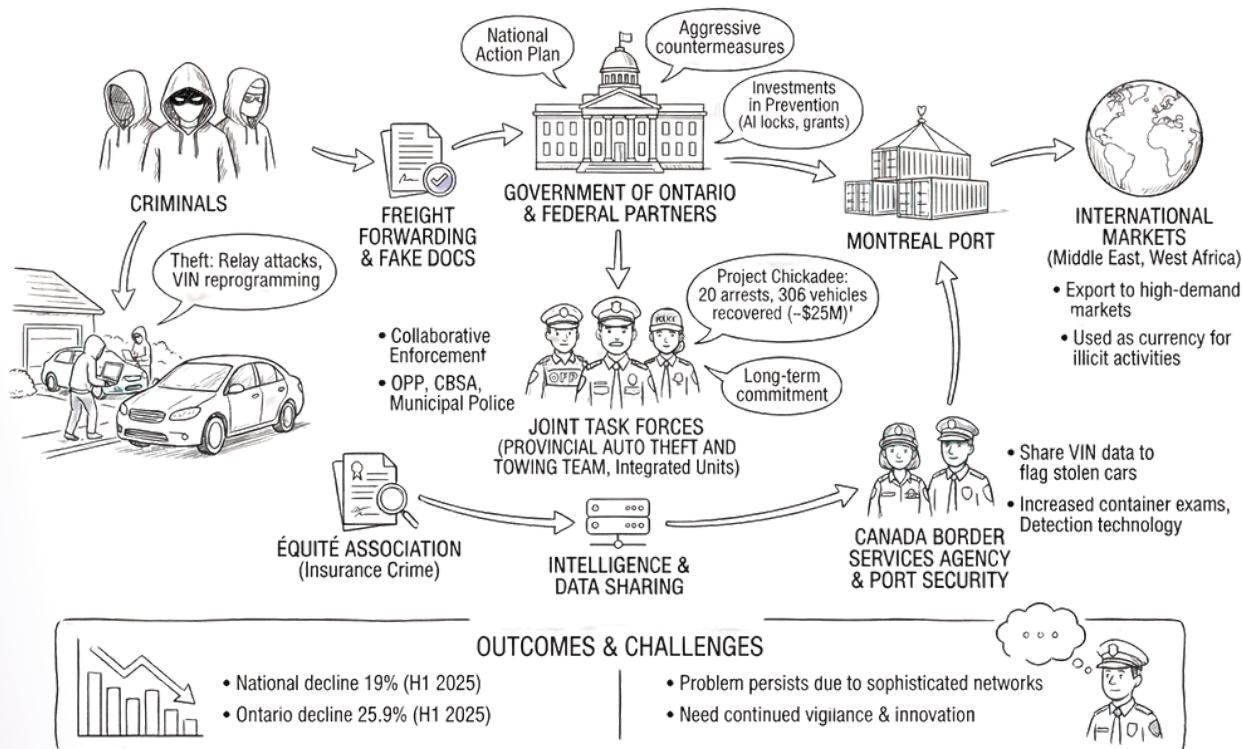
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# What is a Rich Picture?

A Rich Picture is a free-form, hand-drawn diagram used to capture and explore complex situations. It serves as a visual tool for groups to share perspectives, identify problems, and build a shared understanding of a particular context. The term was popularised by Peter Checkland as a foundational step in his Soft Systems Methodology (SSM).

Unlike formal diagrams, a Rich Picture has few rules. It encourages the use of symbols, sketches, and cartoons to represent a situation's various elements and their relationships. The goal is to create a "rich" visual summary that captures both objective facts and subjective elements like opinions, conflicts, and emotions. By moving away from text, Rich Pictures can help surface hidden issues and unspoken assumptions within a group, making it easier to discuss sensitive topics.



*Rich Picture: Combatting the Auto Theft Crisis in Ontario*

# Key Areas to Include in Your Drawing

When creating a Rich Picture, aim to represent the complete situation as you see it. Your drawing should attempt to capture the following key areas to be effective:

## Structure:

The physical and organizational elements of the situation. This can include buildings, departments, geographical layouts, and key groups or teams.

## People:

The individuals and groups involved, also known as the "actors." Try to depict their roles, responsibilities, and characteristics. Use simple stick figures or more detailed cartoons.

## Issues & Concerns:

The problems, conflicts, anxieties, and points of tension within the situation. These are often the most important part of the picture. Use symbols like storm clouds, question marks, or crossed swords to represent them.

## Processes:

The activities, workflows, and sequences of events that take place. Show how things are done, what information is exchanged, and the flow of actions from one point to another.

## Relationships & Connections:

The links between different elements. Use lines (solid, dotted, jagged) to show communication, influence, dependencies, or conflicts.

## Climate & Culture:

The "soft" or subjective aspects of the situation. This includes the general mood, prevailing attitudes, unspoken rules, and political dynamics. For example, is the environment collaborative, tense, or bureaucratic?

# Dos and Don'ts for Creating Rich Pictures



- Use a large, shared space: Draw on a whiteboard or flip chart paper that is visible to everyone in the group at all times.
- Embrace drawing and symbols: Favour images over words. A simple cartoon or symbol can convey much more information and emotion than a block of text.
- Capture everything: Include facts, opinions, feelings, and conflicts. Don't filter your thoughts or worry about being tidy. The messiness is part of the process.
- Use colour and different line styles: Assign meaning to colours and lines to differentiate between types of relationships, feelings, or elements.
- Collaborate and discuss: Talk with your group as you draw. The conversation that happens while creating the picture is as valuable as the final drawing itself.
- Show yourself in the picture: Include yourself and your group to represent your own perspective and role within the situation.



- Don't write long sentences or paragraphs: Avoid text as much as possible. If you must use words, keep them to single labels or short phrases.
- Don't worry about artistic skill: The quality of the drawing is not important. The goal is to communicate ideas, not to create a masterpiece. Simple stick figures are perfectly fine.
- Don't try to be too structured: Avoid creating a formal flowchart or organizational chart. A Rich Picture should be a free-flowing and even chaotic representation of reality.
- Don't hide from difficult issues: The purpose is to surface problems and conflicts. Be brave and include the challenging or sensitive aspects of the situation.
- Don't let one person dominate: Ensure everyone in the group has a chance to contribute to the drawing and the discussion. Pass the pens around.

# Rich Pictures FAQs

## 1. What is a rich picture?

A rich picture is a pictorial, cartoon-like representation used in Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) to capture the complexity of an unstructured, problematical situation. Instead of formal systems models, it is a form of free artistic expression that displays the main entities, structures, viewpoints, processes, and current or potential issues.

## 2. What is the main purpose of drawing a rich picture?

The primary purpose is to act as an aide-memoire that helps analysts and stakeholders gain a holistic appreciation of a problem situation. Because the complexity of human affairs involves multiple interacting relationships, a rich picture captures these relationships far better than linear prose. It serves as an excellent starting point for exploratory discussion and debate.

## 3. Are there formal rules or diagramming conventions I need to follow?

No. Rich pictures are intrinsically individualistic and there are virtually no formal diagramming conventions. In fact, one of the primary guidelines is to not structure the rich picture in any formal way. Arrows and boxes should be used merely as artistic expressions rather than conventional systems maps.

## 4. What key elements should be included in a rich picture?

A comprehensive rich picture should capture the "climate" of a situation, which is the relationship between its structure (the slow-to-change physical or organizational elements) and its processes (what is actually going on). Additionally, you should not exclude "soft" elements like organizational culture, emotions, conflicting points of view, power dynamics, and values. It is also recommended to include a title and a date.

## 5. Should I include myself in the rich picture?

Yes. If you are intervening in an organization or analyzing a problem, you should include a representation of yourself or your problem-solving team. You are part of the messy situation, and clarifying your relationship to the client and problem owners is an important part of the context.

## **6. When are rich pictures used within the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) process?**

Rich pictures are used at the very beginning of the SSM learning cycle, specifically during the "finding out" or expression phase (Stages 1 and 2). They help participants understand the problem area before any formal systems modeling or root definitions are created.

## **7. Should I use text or standard symbols?**

While you can use words sparingly, you should avoid using too many words and definitely avoid full sentences, as the goal is to process the information visually and holistically rather than serially (by reading). While using standard symbols might seem easier or faster, it is generally warned against because it can oversimplify delicate, complicated features and make the picture too stylized and unoriginal.

## **8. Does a rich picture solve the problem?**

No. A rich picture does not attempt to solve the problem or design a system. Its only function is to display the messy situation as it currently exists so that stakeholders can identify themes, explore issues, and decide which relevant systems should be formally modeled in later stages.

## **9. Is it better to create rich pictures individually or as a group?**

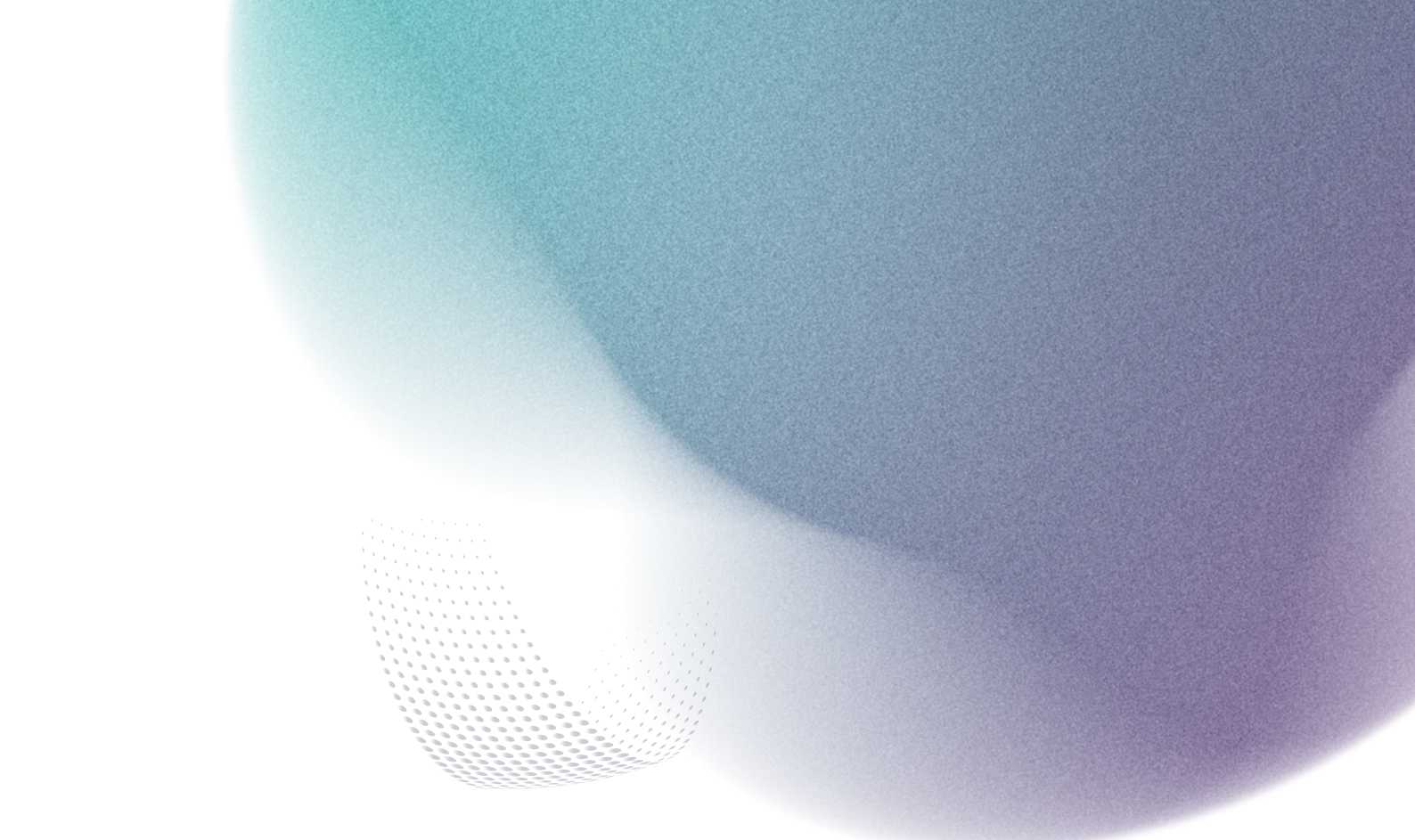
Rich pictures can be drawn individually or in small groups. They are exceptionally valuable as a group exercise because they allow hidden differences in interpretation to be made explicit. When team members draw or share their pictures, it facilitates learning, helps groups explore conflicted understandings, and permits them to agree on a shared interpretation.

## **10. Can humor be incorporated into a rich picture?**

Yes. Using humor or cartoon-type characterizations is a common and effective practice. Deliberately humorous representations can draw attention to controversial or non-threatening issues, which often leads to illuminating discussions that might not have happened otherwise. However, humor should not be forced just for the sake of it.

# References:

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