What is this?

The concept of Social Messes
Russell Ackoff, of the Wharton School, originated the concept of the mess. He describes messes as collections of inter-related problems, suggesting that "no problem ever exists in complete isolation. Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems." In this mess map, the problems are highlighted in yellow boxes.

At MacroVU, we think of social messes as having these characteristics:

- complicated, complex, and ambiguous
- much uncertainty – even as to what the problems are, let alone what the solutions might be
- great constraints
- tightly interconnected, economically, socially, politically, technologically
- seen differently from different points of view, and quite different world views
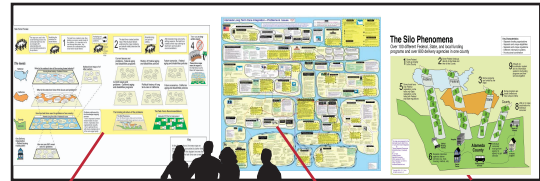- contain many value conflicts
- are often a-logical or illogical

Helping Task Force in Alameda County
In 2003, we helped a task force focused on improving the delivery of services to the elderly and disabled in Alameda County California.

Mess Mapping Process
The Mess Mapping™ process is a general method for groups working on complex problems. In the Alameda context, we used it to capture and synthesize stakeholder expertise and create organizational alignment. It was based on the assumption that multidisciplinary task groups need special forms of group interactions in order to effectively use the expertise assembled. Nearly every expert in such a group has come to the table with their pet "solutions" to the "problem." This interferes with deeper exploration of the complexity of the mess as well as offer preventing creative exchange.

The use of the concept of a "mess' as a systemically inter-related set of problems breaks that initial mental set of the experts and challenges them to work together to produce an analysis they would not have produced by themselves or in a conventional group process. This changes their motivation from displaying their expertise to involvement in exploring new territory together.

The use of the physical metaphor of a "map" also intrigues them. It draws on their experiences of navigating in new territory as well as in the process of constructing the map which changes significantly over several sessions.

During the process, a large version (24 x 36 inches) of a "seed" mess map or template was placed on each table. An even larger, mural size version hung on the wall. The different tables contributed their understandings of the various interlocking problems and dilemmas. The MacroVU team together with the task force then created a more polished mess map for communication (Shown on the right. For the Alameda process, we also created two other important supplementary maps giving other views of the mess. (See below.)

This panel shows how the organizations are viewed from five different levels of the bureaucracy from federal through state, county, and local levels to individual private organizations.

This panel shows how the task force saw the interrelated issues – a tangled mess of problems and multiple causal loops that cross the boundaries of many organizations. (See detailed version on right.)

This panel shows how the unique set of funding sources complicated the lives of both the agency delivering help and the recipients.

Who participated in the process?
It is always important to have relevant representation from all stakeholder sectors for a successful mess mapping process. In this case, we had key participants from about 15 organization all of whom had some involvement in delivery of services. This enabled the description of the mess to come from the deep understandings of these participants, and also began to prime them for a more holistic look at the inter-related set of problems and dilemmas from multiple points of view

Different levels of analysis for social messes
Messes can be analyzed and described at different levels of focus. For example we have helped county task forces on mental health, and national and international task forces on such topics as flu pandemics and climate change to address their messes.

In the Alameda case identifying causes was part of the exercise for the stakeholder group to "make the connections" before they began to work on a next phase (More data? More analysis? Recommendations? Actions?). Making the mess map is thought of as only the first phase in the analysis of complicated messy issues.

How do I get updates & revisions and other info-maps in the series?

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The Silo Phenomena

Over 100 different Federal, State, and local funding programs and over 800 delivery agencies in one county

2001

1 Some Federal funds go directly to the County

2 Some Federal funds go directly to the State and then to the County

9 Virtually no coordination system and no information system to tie funding programs and their services together

3 Some programs are funded by the State

5 Some funds have only Federal regulations; some have only State regulations; some have both Federal and State regulations

4 Some programs are locally funded and have unique criteria

8 Little or no case coordination for individual consumer

Federal

Federal

State

County

Meals on Wheels

Hospital

Skilled Nursing Facility

Alameda County

7 Individual consumer must go from agency to agency to get services

In-home support

6 Separate individual agencies deliver services (e.g. food, housing, medical, etc.)

Senior Center

Transportation services

This map was prepared for the Alameda County Task Force on Long Term Care Integration by Trilogy Integrated Resources (Bruce Bronzan, President) and R. E. Horn