

## TOOL

# THE PROBLEM TREE AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOLUTIONS

### WHY

It is important to understand the problem that you are addressing to come up with effective solutions.

A problem analysis can help you to:

- **Understand** the problem more in depth and design a more effective strategy.
- **Visualize the links** between the main problem, the consequences of the problem and the root causes.
- **Analyze** the **root causes** of the problem in order to decide where to focus your work to change things.
- Provide **evidence** to convince others of the validity of your analyses and argument.

The problem analysis and the development of solutions is useful both for overall project planning and for working with advocacy as part of your project.

### WHEN

Do a problem tree and a solution analysis in order to **understand your issue** and **plan** your work. Be aware of changes to the context that affect the issue **during your project** and consider if you need to rethink your strategy.

### HOW

A problem analysis is about deepening your understanding. If you do it together as a **team** or as part of a **participatory workshop** you get more views of the problem and jointly strengthen your understanding.

The **problem tree** helps you to visualize and analyze the links between the main problem, the resultant consequences and the root causes.

- Write the main concern/problem in the centre of a large sheet of flip chart paper. This will be **the trunk** of the problem tree.
- Add the causes of the problem below the main problem.

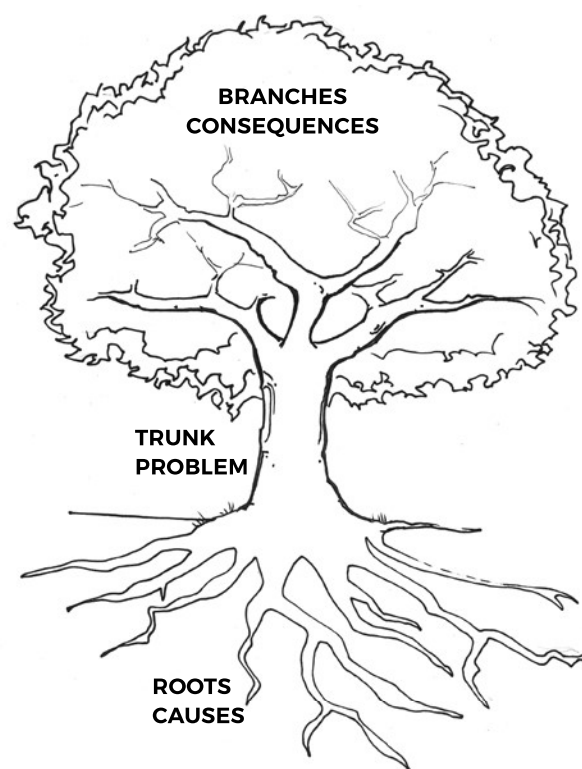
The causes form **the roots** of the problem tree and can grow deep and connect to each other, depending on the problem.

You can either write directly on the flip chart or use post-it notes in order to move the causes around as necessary. Use arrows to show the relationship between the root causes and the problem.

- Draw arrows leading upwards from the main problem and add the various consequences of that problem.

These are **the branches** of the tree. For each of these consequences you can branch out to any further consequences.

- Keep adding causes and consequences with arrows showing how they contribute to each set of roots and branches until you can think of no more. You can also look at **the soil**, that the tree grows in – are the



## » KEEP ASKING “WHY?”

The children are not going to school – why?  
 Their parents do not want to send the children to school – why?  
 The parents say that the teachers are not there – why?  
 The teachers have not been paid their salaries from the local government – why?  
 The education official says the municipality has not received the funds set aside for education from the provincial government – ... and so on.

It is important to assess the underlying root causes of a problem. Maybe the initial analysis of the problem shows that the parents don't want to send the children to school. A deeper analysis of the problem might reveal that the cause of the problem is to be found in that the teachers have not received salaries and that there are several reasons for this; maybe the area is not prioritized by the provincial government or maybe there are delays in the release of budgeted funds for education in the province. An even deeper analysis may reveal structural constraints such as the debt burden on the national economy preventing sufficient spending on education.

The repeated asking of the question “why?” helps you to dig deeper and analyze the problem in depth.

roots nourished, is it fertile soil for the problem?  
 It can be useful to summarize your findings of the problem and its consequences and present it along with your suggestions for solutions.

It is good for motivating your choice of strategy in a **project application**. And the problem analysis and your proposed solution can form the basis for your core message in an **advocacy campaign**. It can be used in policy briefings, to motivate campaigns or in a meeting with a decision maker.

When you design your project or make an advocacy strategy, it is important to think through the **solutions to the problem**

- What solution would address the root causes you have identified?
- What needs to change?
- Who can help bring about the change e.g. the government, the parliament, local traditional authorities, parents or somebody else?
- What attitudes and behaviors need to change?

## » EXAMPLE OF A PROBLEM SOLUTION STATEMENT AS A CORE MESSAGE

A large part of the children in our municipality are not going to school due to parents concerns of the quality of school. Often teachers are absent and the children are then left on their own with no adults to teach them. The teachers complain that they have not been paid their salaries from the local government and therefore have to work other jobs. The delay in salaries is due to that the municipality education office has not received the funds set aside for education from the provincial government. The consequence of this is that the futures of a large number of children are compromised and that teachers and parents alike are frustrated.

This is a recurrent problem in our municipality. It is time for the provincial government to ensure that the provincial funds for education are distributed in time to the municipal education authorities.

**Test your solution** to ensure that it is a realistic task you set for yourself

- Is your solution realistic? What can you and your organization realistically do to achieve this change?
- Can it be implemented with reasonable expenses?
- Is your solution simple and easy to understand?
- Could your solution achieve results within the time frame of your project?
- Who will like your solution or be opposed to it?
- Are there other solutions to the problem that are more practical than your initial idea?

### **SET CLEAR GOALS**

It can be difficult to reach your goal in a project or with an advocacy strategy, when:

- The problem is not clearly defined
- There is little understanding of what creates the problem and what the solution might be
- There isn't sufficient people, who find the problem and the solution serious and necessary enough to prioritize

*Source: A new weave of power, people and politics*