Problem Tree Analysis

Step by Step

The problem tree should be developed as a participatory group activity. 6 to 8 people is often a good group size. It is important to ensure that groups are structured in ways that enable particular viewpoints, especially those of the less powerful, to be expressed.

1. Brainstorm problems and identify the focal problem as an individual starter problem. Write it on a card or "Post-it". This first step can either be completely open (no pre-conceived notions as to what stakeholder's priority concerns/ problems might be), or more directed, through specifying a "known" high order problem or objective based on preliminary analysis of existing information and initial stakeholder consultations.
2. Brainstorm all of the other problems associated with the focal problem and write each problem on a separate card or "Post-it".
3. Establish a hierarchy of causes and effects. Problems which are directly causing the focal problem are put below, and problems which are direct effects of the focal problem are put above
4. For each problem, ask the question "What causes this problem?" Write the causes on separate cards and place them below the problem they cause. If there are two or more causes of a problem, and one is not the cause of the other, then place them on the same level.
5. Connect the problems with case-effect arrows – clearly showing key links.
6. Review the problem tree and verify its validity and completeness. Ask yourself/ the group – "Are there important problems that have not been mentioned yet?" If so, specify the problems and include them at an appropriate place in the tree.
7. Copy the problem tree onto a sheet of paper to keep as a record, and distribute (as appropriate) for further comment/ information.

The heart of the exercise is the discussion, debate and dialogue that is generated as factors are arranged and re-arranged, often forming sub-dividing roots and branches.

Discussion questions might include

- Does this represent the reality? Are the economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions to the problem considered?
- Which causes and consequences are getting better, which are getting worse and which are staying the same?
- What are the most serious consequences? Which are of most concern? What criteria are important to us in thinking about a way forward?
- Which causes are easiest/ most difficult to address? What possible solutions or options might there be? Where could a policy change help address a cause of consequence, or create a solution?
- What decisions have we made, and what actions have we agreed?

The problem tree can be converted into an objectives tree by rephrasing each of the problems into positive desirable outcomes – as if the problem has already been treated. In this way, root causes and consequences are turned into root solutions, and key project or influencing entry points are quickly established.

Key points to remember

- The quality of output will be determined by who is involved in the analysis and the skills of the facilitator. Involving stakeholder representatives with appropriate knowledge and skills is critical.
- It may be best to run separate problem analysis workshops with different stakeholder groups.
- The process is as important as the product and should be seen as a learning experience and an opportunity for different views and interests to be expressed.
- The problem tree should be a valid but simple representation of the current negative situation. It cannot (and should not) contain or explain the complexities of every identifiable cause-effect relationship.