

Tool #2: Deciding to solve the problem & choosing between problems

The following table can be used or adapted to help clarify the extent of a problem & whether you should work with it. This can also be useful if you need to prioritise amongst problems.

	Problem 1:	Problem 2:
How frequently does the problem occur? (frequency)		
How many people are affected? (scope/range)		
For what amount of time are people affected? (duration)		
How severe is the effect? Does it disrupt personal or community life? (severity)		
Does the problem deprive people of legal or moral rights? (legality)		
How important do group members perceive the problem to be?		
How important is the problem perceived to be by others?		
How likely is it that we can solve/significantly improve the problem? Are we best suited to do this? (feasibility)		
Can we expect any negative consequences of our involvement?		

Tool #1: Deciding on a problem statement

Before you start, remember two basic principles:

* Define the problem in terms of needs, and not solutions. If you define the problem in terms of possible solutions, you close the door to other, possibly more effective solutions. "Violent crime in our suburb is unacceptably high," offers space for many more possible solutions than, "We need more police patrols," .

* Define the problem as being 'shared'; avoid assigning blame for the problem. This is particularly important if different people (or groups) with a history of bad relations need to be working together to solve the problem. Teachers may be frustrated with high truancy rates, but blaming students uniquely for problems at school is sure to alienate students from helping to solve the problem.

Some ideas on how to go about it:

The facilitator can write a problem statement on the board, and everyone can give feedback on it, until the statement has developed into something everyone is pleased with.

You can accept someone else's definition of the problem, or use it as a starting point, modifying it to fit your needs.

You can use this more time consuming process, which works best in groups with less than 20 people.

1. Ask everyone present at the meeting to write down his/her definition of the problem.
2. Ask people to pair off and share their problem statements with each other. Together, the pair can create a new problem statement, incorporating ideas from both.
3. Ask pairs to join together in groups of four, and again merge the statements into one.
4. Continue joining the groups in larger and larger groups until everyone is together again, and you have one agreed upon statement.

After you have reached a problem statement, define the key terms, even if you think everyone understands them.

EG: Your organization has come up with the problem statement "Adolescent pregnancy is a problem in our community." That seems pretty clear, doesn't it? But consider the word "community" for a moment. You may have one person who defines community as "the city you live in," a second who defines it as, "this suburb" and a third who considers "our community" to relate to a specific cultural group.

Tool #3: Analysing the Problem–Why does the problem exist?

The "but why" technique. This simple exercise can be done easily with a large group, or even on your own. Write the problem statement, and ask participants, "Why does this problem exist?" Write down the answer given, and ask, "But why does (the answer) occur?"

For example, your problem might be:

"Children often fall asleep in class,"

But why?

"Because they have no energy."

But why?

"Because they don't eat breakfast."

But why?

And so on.

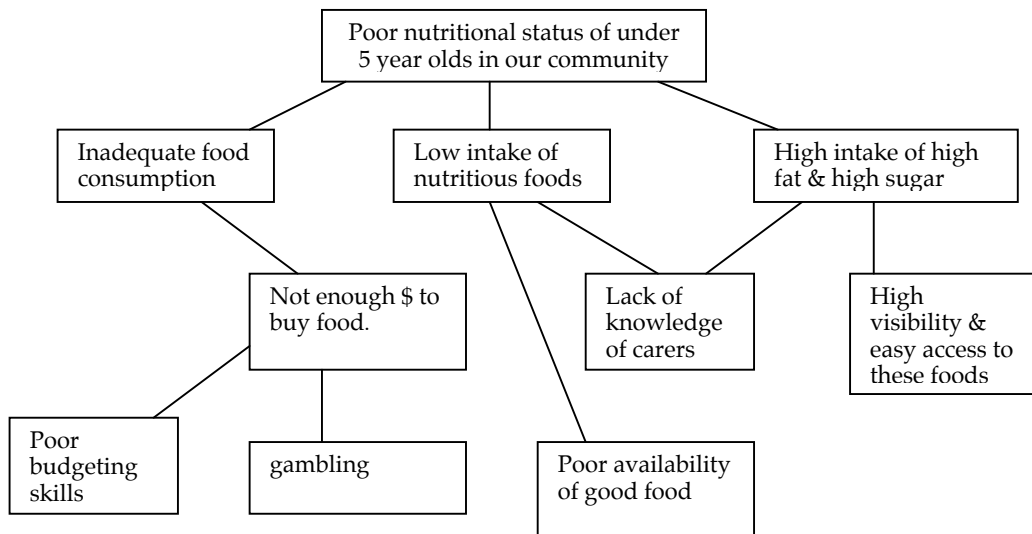
Continue down the line until participants can comfortably agree on the root cause of the problem. Agreement is essential here; if people don't even agree about the source of the problem, an effective solution may well be out of reach.

Adapted from <http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/>

Community Toolbox, Bringing Solutions to Light, University of Kansas

A more detailed analysis can be achieved by development of a 'problem tree'. This can be drawn on a white board or 'built up' from individually written on pieces of paper.

Write the main problem at the top of the board. Ask people to think of all the 'risk factors' which contribute to the problem, and any other factors which contribute to those risk factors. See example:



The advantage of this approach is that it offers a strong base for program design.

Tool #4: Generating & Choosing Solutions

Simply go around the room & ask everyone to suggest ideas. No tricks, but it works!

Send a piece of paper around the room. People can write down their ideas, which can later be discussed without anyone knowing who suggested which idea.

'Idea writing' helps many people generate & comment on ideas in a short amount of time. Large groups should be divided into small groups of five or six. Each person writes a possible solution to the problem on his/her paper. Then each person puts their paper on a table in the middle of the group. Next, everyone takes someone else's paper & comments on the idea. People keep doing this until everyone in the group has commented on everyone else's idea. During or after the meeting, all the ideas are discussed or summarised in a report.

Brainstorming is a tried-and-true way to come up with ideas in a group. The problem is stated, the facilitator stands in front of the group & records all of their ideas.

Variations on brainstorming:

- A period of individual brainstorming can precede the group activity. Each person generates his/her own ideas privately & later shares them with the group.
- If idea generating is done on a day after you defined & analysed the problem, group members can be asked to generate solutions as "homework" between the two sessions.

Some helpful hints to keep in mind when brainstorming include:

- Watch out for assumptions; every unnecessary assumption reduces the number of potential solutions.
- Simply giving instructions that people can or should be creative in the brainstorming session may help raise the number & quality of solutions created.
- All ideas should be written down. An idea that seems ridiculous on first hearing it might turn out to be possible, even desirable. Or it might be modified by other members of the group, & end up being the perfect solution to the problem.
- Nobody should comment on how good or bad the ideas are; there should be no discussion about them at this time. People keep producing all kinds of ideas until everyone runs out of steam.
- Ideas can be "piggybacked" / combined as people see connections during the process.
- The facilitator should keep the energy high, & constantly ask for more and different ideas.
- If the group gets off the subject, the facilitator or recorder can gently remind them of why they are there.
- Discussion, analysis, & idea selection come later.

Tool #5: Comparing solutions

	Solution 1:	Solution 2:
List what you like about the idea		
List what you don't like about the idea		
Might there be any unexpected consequences of the solution?		
Is it practical?		
Is it likely to be effective?		
Is it cost effective?		
Will it be easy to put into practice?		
Will it be accepted from everyone involved?		
Is it consistent with other things done by the group?		

Tool #6: Deciding on a Solution.

"nominal group technique." Ask each participant to assign a number to every solution, with one being their favorite solution, two being their second favorite, and so on. The numbers are all added up, and the solution with the lowest value is the one chosen.

	Solution 1:	Solution 2:	Solution 3:
Person 1			
Person 2			
Person 3			
Person 4			
Person 5			
Person 6			
Person 7			
Person 8			
Person 9			
Person 10			
SCORE (lowest score wins!)			

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