

Tool 8: Problem Definition Worksheet

Aim of the tool

Analyse the problem you are working on.

When to use it?

Connection stage, when the focus lies on defining the issue at stake.

What is a Problem Definition Worksheet?

This tool, part of the [Development, Impact & You Toolkit of NESTA](#), can help clarify and frame the issue at stake in your MSP. Often what seems to be the problem is only a symptom of a deeper problem. This tool helps to understand the dimensions of the problem, by looking at it from different angles. You can apply it individually, but also do this with a group of stakeholders as a way to bring ideas towards a similar direction.

Why develop a Problem Definition Worksheet?

This fine-tuned version of the problem definition worksheet helps to capture, compare and discuss different viewpoints on a perceived problem. It both works to open up a problem – presenting it in a way that can be examined from a number of angles – as well as helping to define the wider context and issues involved.

This problem definition worksheet generates insights by asking five questions. These questions are very useful for facilitators to structure group discussions. To enable rich contributions, small groups can be given time to reflect as individuals and teams before any plenary discussion. Also comparing one's own analysis with other stakeholders will drastically improve the output since they will bring in the necessary reality check against new contexts and perspectives.

The five questions help participants to stretch their current understanding and framing of the problem. It also gives you a standardised way to compare several different problems, which might seem to be very different on the surface.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

I want to clarify my priorities
by focusing on key critical issues

What is the key issue you are trying to address and why is it important?	Who is it a problem for?	What social or cultural factors shape this problem?	What evidence do you have that this is worth the investment?	Can you think of this problem in a different way? Can you reframe it?
--	--------------------------	---	--	--

Source: Development Impact & You Toolkit. Inspired by Julier, J., Kimbell, L. (2012). Printable versions of different sizes of this worksheet can be downloaded from the DIY Toolkit [website](https://diy-toolkit.org).

Sources and further reading

NESTA & Rockefeller Foundation (2014) Development Impact & You Toolkit. #8: Problem definition. <https://diy-toolkit.org/tools/problem-definition/>

Kimbell, L. & Julien, J. (2012). The Social Design Methods Menu. Available for download at http://www.lucykimbell.com/stuff/Fieldstudio_SocialDesignMethodsMenu.pdf

This MSP Tool Guide is curated by WUR, but we recognize that many of the tools included are in the public domain or credited to other authors. Where relevant, they are referenced in the 'Learn more' section.