Tool 14: Problem Tree

Aim of the tool

Create a structural analysis of the causes and effects of an issue or problem.

When to use it?

Problem tree analysis is very useful in planning processes. It fits well in the Shared Language stage of MSPs.

What is a Problem Tree?

Problem tree analysis (also called Situational analysis or just Problem analysis) helps to find solutions by mapping out the anatomy of cause and effect around an issue in a similar way to aMind map, but with more structure.

Why develop a Problem Tree?

The Problem Tree structure brings several advantages:

· The problem can be broken down into manageable and definable chunks. This enables aclearer prioritisation of factors and helps focus objectives;
· There is more understanding of the problem and its often interconnected and sometimescontradictory causes. This is often the first step in finding win-win solutions;
· It identifies the central issues and arguments, and can help establish who and what thepolitical actors and processes are at each stage;
· It can help establish whether further information, evidence or resources are needed tomake a strong case, or build a convincing solution;
· Present issues – rather than apparent, future or past issues – are dealt with and identified;
· The process of analysis often helps build a shared sense of understanding, purpose andaction.

Problem Tree Analysis - Step by step

Problem tree analysis is best carried out in a small focus group of about six to eight people usingflip chart paper or an overhead transparency. It is important that factors can be added as the conversation progresses.

Step 1: Discuss and agree the problem or issue to be analysed. The problem can be broad, as the problem tree will help break it down. The problem or issue is written in the centre of the flip chartand becomes the 'trunk' of the tree. This becomes the 'focal problem'. The problem should be an actual issue everyone feels passionate about, described in general, key wording.

Step 2: Identify the causes of the focal problem – these become the roots – and then the consequences, which become the branches. These causes and consequences can be created on post-it notes or cards, perhaps individually or in pairs, so that they can be arranged in a cause-and-effect logic.

The heart of the exercise is the discussion, debate and dialogue generated in the process of creating the tree. Take time to allow people to explain their feelings and reasoning, and record related ideas and points that come up on separate flip chart paper under titles such as 'solutions','concerns' and 'dilemmas'.

Discussion questions might include:

· Does this represent the reality? Are the economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions to theproblem 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 or consequence, or create a solution?

· What decisions have we made, and what actions have we agreed on?

Example of a problem tree
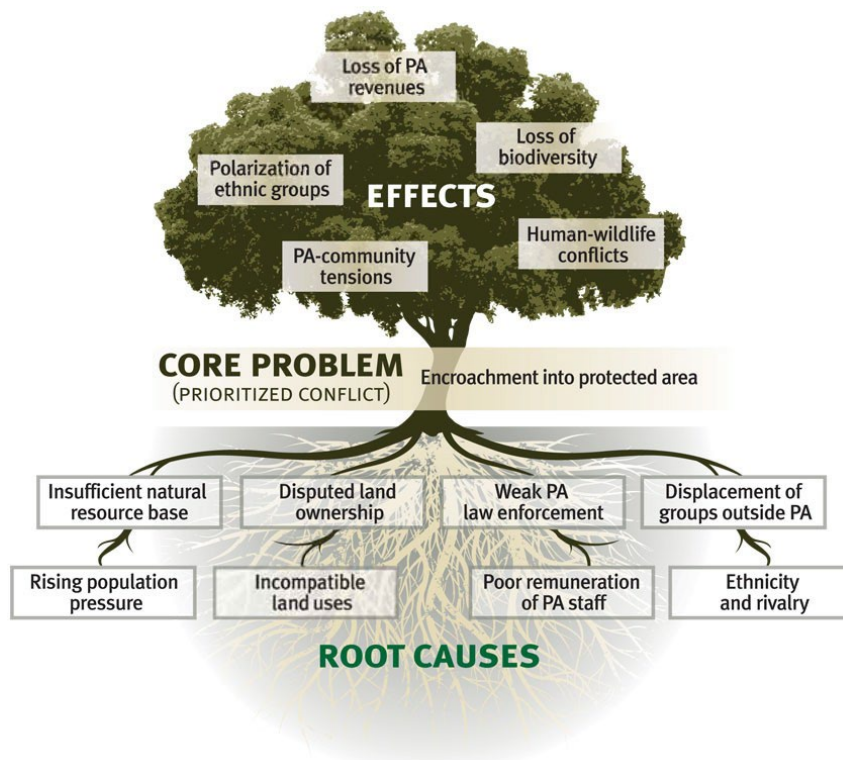
Source: www.iisd.org/csconservation/conflict_tree.aspx

Variations

Objective Tree: Following the problem tree analysis, it is possible to rephrase each of the problemsinto positive desirable outcomes – as if the problem had already been treated, the problem can be turned into an objectives tree. In this way, root causes and consequences are turned into root solutions, and key project or influencing entry points are quickly established. A Force Fieldanalysis (Tool 16) could be a useful next step.

Opportunity Tree: Instead of focusing on 'problems' it is possible to use the tree to analyse opportunities. This implies changing the initial question from "what is the problem and what areunderlying causes" to "what works well and what are underlying causes". Can be done after Appreciative story telling (Tool 6).

Learn more

This description has been adapted from the ODI Toolkit, Successful Communication, A Toolkit forResearchers and Civil Society Organisations. www.odi.org/publications/5258–problem–tree– analysis.

The opportunity tree is adapted from J. M. Chevalier and D. J. Buckles (2012). *Participatory ActionResearch, Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. London, Routledge. Link