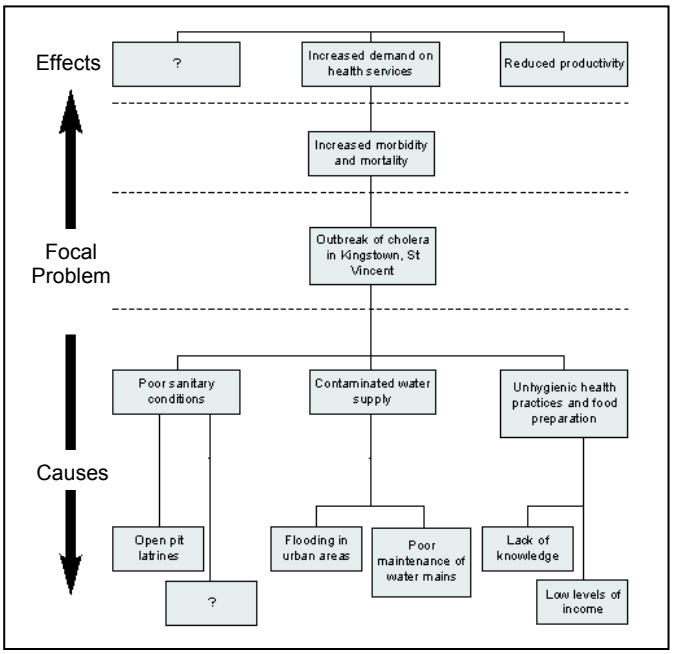
Problem Tree Analysis

Problem tree analysis is central to many forms of project planning and is well developed among development agencies. 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 a Mind map, but with more structure. This brings several advantages:

- The problem can be broken down into manageable and definable chunks. This enables a clearer prioritisation of factors and helps focus objectives;
- There is more understanding of the problem and its often interconnected and even contradictory causes. This is often the first step in finding win-win solutions;
- It identifies the constituent issues and arguments, and can help establish who and what the political actors and processes are at each stage;
- It can help establish whether further information, evidence or resources are needed to make 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 and action.

Figure 4: Problem tree analysis



Problem tree analysis is best carried out in a small focus group of about six to eight people using flip chart paper or an overhead transparency. It is important that factors can be added as the conversation progresses. The first step is to discuss and agree the problem or issue to be analysed. Do not worry if it seems like a broad topic because the problem tree will help break it down. The problem or issue is written in the centre of the flip chart and becomes the 'trunk' of the tree. This becomes the 'focal problem'. The wording does not need to be exact as the roots and branches will further define it, but it should describe an actual issue that everyone feels passionately about.

Next, the group identify the causes of the focal problem – these become the roots – and then identify 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 that is generated as factors are arranged and re-arranged, often forming sub-dividing roots and branches (like a Mind map). 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 decisions.

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 or consequence, or create a solution?
- What decisions have we made, and what actions have we agreed?

The Problem tree is closely linked to the Objectives tree, another key tool in the project planner's repertoire, and well used by development agencies. The Problem tree can be converted into an objectives tree by rephrasing each of the problems into positive desirable outcomes – as if the problem had 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. These objectives may well be worded as objectives for change. These can then feed into a Force field analysis which provides a useful next step.

A good example

As part of designing an HIV/AIDS activity in Kenya, a DFID design team needed to have a deeper understanding of various issues and constraints related to the epidemic. Before moving to a large log frame workshop the team decided to conduct focus group interviews with potential target groups and service providers. Through the focus groups the team gained a much deeper understanding of HIV/AIDS-related problems, constraints and opportunities. At the same time, participants in the groups learned much about common problems they themselves were facing and their possible solutions. Counselling and testing groups discovered they all faced a critical issue about how to protect the confidentiality of HIV-positive clients. Through the discussion they were able to exchange ideas of how to achieve this. Some had a policy focus and helped understand where changes in government practise and legislation could help. These issues were brought into the log frame workshop, where they were integrated in the design through an activity output dealing with improved counselling and testing services.

Further resources

- There are many references to Problem analysis in toolkits, particularly from development agencies. These include a detailed description in DFID's Social Development toolkit (from which the diagram and example are taken) and CERTI's (Complex Emergency Response and Transition Initiative) crisis and transition toolkit:
  - http://www.dfid.gov.uk/FOI/tools/chapter_03.htm
  - http://www.certi.org/publications/Manuals/rap-16-section3.htm