Democratic Governance Facility
Partners' pre-Proposal Workshop
Contextual (Problem) Analysis in Program Design

The problem to be addressed by a project is derived out of a careful analysis of the operating context. Therefore problem analysis is an integral aspect of the wider contextual analysis.

A problem is a discrepancy between an existing and a desired state of affairs.

The problem will be identified through an analytical study of the operating context. To be able to accurately prescribe interventions to address the problem, it will have to be properly defined, described and then analysed.

Why define the problem?

Defining a problem so that it is relevant to decision-makers begins with awareness that a problem exists or, more specifically, that there is a difference between the actual and desired state of affairs. It is essential for the advocate for change to be very clear about what the problem really is. To go forward not being clear or not having analysed the problem will send you, the advocate for change, on the wrong solution path.

- One person's problem is another person's satisfactory state of affairs
- A problem occurs when there is a difference between "what should be" and "what is", between the ideal and the actual situation
- A problem expresses the difference between the hoped for and the actual situation; and
- Is directly or indirectly related to the wellbeing of the population.

Before something can be said to be a problem, you have to:

- be aware of the discrepancy;
- be under pressure to take action; and
- have the resources necessary to take action

How do you become aware you have a discrepancy?

You have to make a comparison between the current state of affairs and some standard.

What is that standard?

It can be past performance, previously set goals, or the performance of some other unit within the organization or in other organizations.

The problem must also be such that it puts some type of pressure to act. Pressure might include:

- organizational policies,
- deadlines, financial crises,
- complaints,
- expectations from management,
- a proposed change or a continuing community demand.

Description of the problem

Before attempting to solve a problem, you need to describe it in detail. You do this so you can understand how the problem affects the process being examined, such as delivery of a health service to a community.

Example: Health Centre Case Study

A health centre receives complaints from users regarding the quality of the services. A discrepancy exists between the numbers of complaints currently being received in comparison to the previous year. The number of complaints is now reaching a volume that is unacceptable. Use the problem description tool below:

How frequently does the problem occur?

Verbal and written complaints are being received on a daily basis.

When does it generally occur?

It appears to have started following a reduction in staffing levels.

Where does it generally occur?

The location is not relevant to this situation.

Who is most affected?

Obviously the users are, but so are the staffs as they are becoming quite agitated by the complaints and the workload they are experiencing.

The problem can therefore be summarized as: ***Patient dissatisfaction, affecting both patients and staff, which appears to have started following a reduction in staff.***

Analysing the problem

Now that you have described the problem, you can move on to analysing it. To act most effectively, you should analyse its causes and prioritize the most important factors. Acting on those critical causal factors will solve most of the problem.

Example: Use the health services case example above and apply the brain-storming tool.

Put some users in a room together with members of staff, and ask them the following question:

"In your opinion, what are the problems of quality that the health centre is facing?" list and seek clarification on each, ask them which ones to keep and which ones to drop off.

The list could end up including:

- no appointments on Tuesdays or Wednesday afternoons
- not enough chairs in the waiting room
- the waiting area is noisy and crowded
- delays in registering on arrival
- not enough nursing staff
- have to wait too long to get an appointment
- long waiting time at appointments
- patients feel that they are not treated with respect
- No supervision by superiors from district and national level
- Under payment of staff
- Delayed staff salaries
- Delayed staff salaries Delayed staff salaries
- Lack of basic equipment and drugs at the facility

The result of the brainstorming session is a final list of the problems that are impacting the quality of the services provided at the health centre.

Prioritizing the problem

Once you have analysed the causes of a problem you can use a Prioritization Matrix to prioritize the important causes.

By using this method of prioritizing problems, you are able to look at the data and determine which problems are most important according to this group of patients and staff.

Problem	Frequency	Importance	Feasibility	Total points
No appointments on Tuesdays or Wednesday afternoons				
Not enough chairs in the waiting room				
Waiting area is noisy and crowded				
Delays in registering on arrival				
Not enough nursing staff				
Have to wait too long to get an appointment				
Long waiting time at appointments				
Patients feel that they are not treated with				

respect				
No supervision by superiors from district and national level				
Under payment of staff				
Delayed staff salaries				
Lack of basic equipment and drugs at the facility				

Following an analysis of the problem, you will be ready to consider the range of solutions available to you. You have now described and analysed your problem, and prioritized the causes. The next step is to start planning your way forward. Given that you have decided to be the change agent and advocate for change, it is useful to assess your strengths and weaknesses and consider where your opportunities and threats are going to come from. A good internal SWOT analysis will inform your planning.

You also:

- assess the risk of not addressing or addressing
- look at the viability of addressing or not addressing
- look at the added value of addressing or not addressing

Undertaking a Force Field Analysis

Force field analysis is a method used to get a complete view of all the forces for and against a plan so that a decision can be made which takes into account all interests. In effect, this is a method of weighing both the pros and cons.

Example

Rating	Forces for	Plan	Forces against	Rating
4	Peer support		Budget constraints	5
5	Community support		Not seen as priority	5
4	Support of ULGA		No advocacy experience	3
3	Supportive data available		Do not know decision-makers	3
16				**16**

In this case the forces for and against are even, so there is a 50/50 chance of success. You need to determine whether I should proceed or not. It will depend on the significance or importance of the issue.

If the score for the forces against change or the plan are greater than the score for forces for change, you might have to reconsider the feasibility of proceeding. Success is likely to be very difficult. If the score for forces for change or the plan are highest then you can proceed but develop strategies for reducing the negative impact of the forces against change.

Practical application of a good contextual/practical analysis

- Determining the relevancy of the problem and subsequent intervention(s)
- Ensuring nothing critical has been missed out
- Guiding determination of what change we want to cause
- Guiding the determination of project outputs, outcomes and impact
- Guiding evaluation design
- 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.