



“The Problem Tree”

An Issue Identification Worksheet for Advocacy Campaigns

1. Identify the Problem - With your peers, come to an agreement on a problem that you’d like to use in this course. Try to pick a problem that you and your peers either experience or observe in your daily life. For example: “There is litter on our community’s streets.” Once you have come to an agreement, draw the trunk of your tree and write the problem inside of the tree trunk. Remember to leave ample space below and above the trunk for the roots and branches of your tree.

2. Brainstorm the causes of the problem - Next, you will need to determine the causes of the problem. These causes will be represented by the roots of the tree. For each individual cause, you will draw a single root from the tree trunk. Brainstorm causes of the problem. Try to think of causes that you either experience or can observe. For example, in response to the problem “there is litter on our community’s streets,” you might write that “people throw their garbage on the street” or “trash gets left behind during garbage collection” as individual causes.

3. Brainstorm underlying causes - Often, the cause of a problem has other underlying causes. For each cause you identified, ask “why?” to discover any underlying causes. For example, “why do people throw their garbage on the street?” or “why does trash get left behind during collection?” Try to focus on underlying causes that are experienced or observable such as, “there are no public trash or recycling bins for pedestrians” or “excess garbage falls out of the bin during collection.” Write each underlying cause as an additional root that branches off the original root. The more you ask “why,” the deeper the roots of your tree will go.

4. Brainstorm the effects of the problem - Next, you will determine the effects of the problem. The effects of the problem will be represented as the branches of the tree. For each individual effect, you will draw a single branch from the tree trunk. Brainstorm effects of the problem. Try to think of effects that you either experience or can observe. For example, in response to the problem “there is litter on our community’s streets,” you might write “the garbage gets washed into the storm drains” as an individual effect.

5. Brainstorm effects of the effects - The effects of a problem often have additional impacts. To find any additional impacts, ask “then what happens?” for each effect. For example: “The garbage gets washed into the storm drains. Then what happens? The garbage ends up in the local waterways.” Write each additional effect as a branch or leaf off the main branch. The more you ask “then what happens?” the more branches and leaves your tree will have.

6. Reflect - Once you have finished your tree, take a few moments to reflect:

Were there “why?” and “then what happens?” questions that you were not able to answer? How might you go about investigating those questions?

Consider all the the causes and effects of the problem. Who are the people affected by the problem?

Did you notice any unique patterns, trends, or connections between the causes and effects on your tree?

Which causes and effects could take you action on eliminating or alleviating?

Considering your entire tree, what do you think would be the best course of action to address the problem?
