

PROBLEM ANALYSIS

A GUIDE FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS



Ideally, every nonprofit organization or initiative is created to respond to a social or environmental **problem**, which could be a **need or desire**.

➔ *Problem, need, and desire are treated as synonyms in our manuals. Although we logically treat them as the same, **there is a difference in who defines them**.*

ANSWER VS. SOLUTION

Many organizations use the word 'solution' or the phrase 'solve the problem,' but in our approach, this language is misleading.

- ▶ No nonprofit organization can solve an entire problem on its own, no matter how limited or narrowly formulated the problem is.
- ▶ If we achieve the desired future state, we achieve what we call our vision.

It is also important **not to use the word solution** because if we cannot completely solve the problem, it will remain an unnecessary and unfulfilled process which will be discouraging and disappointing for

- ourselves as the professionals at the organization,
- our primary stakeholders and target audience,
- our supporters and donors,
- our volunteers.

EXAMPLE

An organization responding to child hunger will not be able to solve the problem of child hunger alone, even within their local community. So, an organization focused on this issue should pay attention not only to the language used but also the precise definition of the problem, as it is not enough to say that we want to provide a response to child hunger.

DEFINING AND NARROWING DOWN PROBLEMS – THE PROBLEM MAP

The way that we understand and formulate the problem is crucial. If we express the problem too generally, we will not be able to provide a real answer. A detailed analysis of the problem can start with the problem map:

- ▶ Define the **broad problem** by identifying the primary target audience, meaning, who we serve and/or a local scope
- ▶ Examine the **aspects** of the broad problem
- ▶ “Zoom” into the various **causes contributing to the problem**, and mark whether they are direct or indirect. Proceed with analysis of these causes along the **following categories***:

- Economic conditions
- Social conditions
- Political conditions
- Technological conditions
- Environmental conditions
- Health and psychosocial conditions
- Social norms and attitudes



** the first five categories model the PESTEL analysis, for more details see our [Environment and State Analysis guide](#).*

- ▶ When analyzing the problem map, look for elements that are most likely to be **consequences** of the problem, **vs. symptoms of the problem**. Try to identify and separate these.

DECIDING WHICH PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS

Our problem map very often makes us realize that **our initial problem is too complex and too broad** to respond to in general terms.

Therefore, our task is to **define the parts** of the problem that our organization will strive to provide an answer to.

To do this, we should **consider the following factors**:

- ▶ our competence, knowledge, and experience
- ▶ our organizational capacity and strengths
- ▶ key stakeholders

Once the many problems are defined and understood, the strategic planning team must **agree** which ones the organization will respond to. An essential part of the strategic plan is the written analysis of the final and agreed upon problems to focus on as an organization.

For small and medium-sized organizations, **3-5 problems are ideal**, as you will likely not have capacity to address more.

WHO DEFINES THE PROBLEM?

A recurring dilemma in the strategic planning process of many organizations is **who determines what the problems, needs, or desires are** for a given community, group, society, or even more broadly.

Who can be part of the problem analysis process:

- leaders and decision-makers in our organization
- the primary stakeholders (target audiences)
- experts in the field
- or others, such as political decision makers



Usually, **we cannot and should not completely separate these groups** when we are trying to define the problems. Each group sees the problem from a different perspective, level, and context which can be useful to us as an organization.

No matter how the process of defining and analyzing the problems occurs in our organization, some kind of **agreement** is needed between decision makers in our organization and the other groups.

➔ In this process, we can think of our organization as a **facilitator** and an **aggregator** that can combine:

- research and professional scientific consensus in the given field
 - information and data obtained in the field
 - the experiences, needs, and desires of the stakeholders
- with our own organizational values and vision.

This will ensure that we **correctly and precisely formulate:**

1. the problem or problems
2. the organizational goals and objectives that arise from or directly respond to the problems.

VALIDATION

In some cases, the primary stakeholders or target audience of your organization will not define the problem your organization is addressing as their need. For example, an organization working towards a change in attitudes.

Moreover, if we deal with environmental or animal protection, there is no specific primary stakeholder who could define their need.

However, we can perform a different kind of validation with other target audiences to ensure that **our analysis, assumptions, conclusions, and defined problems are valid**. This will not only ensure the relevance of our work, but also:

- can increase our efficiency
- strengthen our relationships and establish trust with members of our target audiences
- make our organization accountable and transparent, which can also contribute to our legitimacy and credibility



VALIDATION METHODS

Validation can be conducted in many ways, including simple methods using few resources, or more complex methods involving external experts. Including:

- ▶ **Questionnaires or written surveys**
- ▶ **Personal interviews**
- ▶ **Focus group interviews**
- ▶ **Participatory workshops, occasions for planning**

Whichever method we choose, we should approach this process with **caution and sensitivity** so that we do not intimidate the respondents and receive information that is biased.