



# Mindful Issue Diagnosis

After cultivating presence and creating space for inner and outer awareness of what is happening, the next critical step to undertake in designing an intervention that will work effectively at the root and systemic levels of an issue is to diagnose your social issue comprehensively. We begin by using a basic problem tree as a tool with the added dimension of applied mindfulness. Problem trees are easy to conduct in a group and allow for the participation of all parties. It is important to conduct this exercise with as many stakeholders as possible, and if you are a facilitator, ensure all voices are heard. What follows are step-by-step instructions for conducting a mindful diagnosis of your issue using a conscious social change approach, adapted from Linda Mayoux's challenge action tree. <sup>1</sup>

## Problem Tree – *What is Happening?*

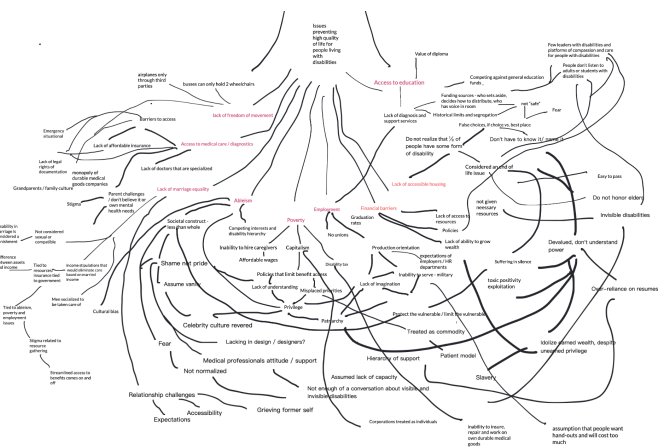
### What is the issue and how big is it? Trunk = Problem

Begin by drawing the trunk of the tree. This represents your issue. Place onto the trunk your one central issue. You can determine the size of your trunk to match the size of the issue you are diagnosing.

### What are the roots? And roots of roots? Roots = Causes

Each of the roots represents a cause of the problem that you marked in the trunk. The first

question you ask is “Why is this an issue?” Try to come up with five reasons why this central issue exists, and for each of these reasons or causes for the issue, draw them on five separate roots. After you have made your first set of roots, ask why each of these roots is a problem or why each of these causes exist. If you find another cause below that root, then make another subroot below it and list that cause. Repeat. For each of these you may find several sub reasons. Continue to draw down from



<sup>1</sup> The Following Problem Tree Activity is inspired by the work of Linda Mayoux: [www.wemanglobal.org](http://www.wemanglobal.org)

the trunk roots and subroots (roots of roots) that explain each cause. For each main root you want to ask “why is this an issue?” of each cause at least five times or go down at least five levels if you can.

Continue to draw the roots down at least 4 or 5 levels or until you cannot think of any more causes for each issue. The more you expand your analysis, the deeper your understanding of the issue, the more ways in which you can intervene with your solution, and the more complete a system you will have for engaging other stakeholders in solving the problem.

It is ideal if you complete your problem tree with as many members of your team and community as possible to ensure you have a comprehensive diagnosis. Allow all parties, including those involved in the issue, to participate so that all voices are represented.

*NOTE: These are not the symptoms, impact or results of the issue, but the reasons why the problem exists.*

### Working at the Roots

We need to know as much as possible about the causes of the problem, because we want to design a solution that works as deeply as possible in the roots. If you change something in a subroot, it will affect all roots or problems in some way above it. The deeper you go with your solution, the more effective and long-lasting your change will be.

### Working Systemically

Once you have finished mapping out your roots, consider the whole system. Notice how certain roots work together to create the problem. Using a different color ink, include on your problem tree the people, institutions or other stakeholders that are involved at each root. Look at where similar stakeholders are involved in more than one root, and be as specific as possible about what classifies them as a group. Consider what institutions are involved – legal system, education system, etc. Notice the connections, relationships, and patterns that show up within your map.

The more subroots you work with in your solution and the more stakeholders you engage, the more comprehensive your solution will be. This is working systemically – understanding that there are many components to a problem and working to address the whole system where possible.



- Who (individuals, organizations, other systems) is involved at each root of the problem, including those perpetuating the problem as well as those also trying to work on the problem?
- What is the nature and quality of the relationships between the stakeholders present in the system?
- What is the positionality of stakeholders and power dynamics underlying the system?
- Where are we (all of those facilitating this analysis) intersecting with the issue? In what ways are there blind spots and ways we have contributed to the status quo?
- How much of the problem is due to behavior or belief systems?
- How much is unconscious?
- What kinds of resistance to change might be experienced and why?
- Where can you see shadows reflected in individual and institutional actions or systems? (refer to the inner work you have done in the Becoming Whole Module)
- What attachments, fear or limiting beliefs are playing out in the underlying dynamics?
- Are certain groups more disadvantaged than others?
- What voices have not yet been consulted in verifying or expanding the diagnosis?
- Do you see any roots that feel most urgent to address?
- How many roots might you address and which stakeholders might you need to engage?

### What are the symptoms of the issue? Branches = Effects

It is important to draw a distinction between causes and effects. The roots are what cause the problem. The branches are the effects of the problem, or the symptoms of the problem. Where you ask the following question of the roots: “Why does this issue exist?”, when you look at the effects, you ask a different question: “What happens as a result of this issue?” Draw these effects as branches.

These branches will later become indicators of whether your core issue is changing. You would not want to focus your intervention or solution on the branches, as this only addresses a symptom and does not work to alleviate the underlying reasons for the issue. However, the more successful you are in solving the problem deep in the roots, you will see fewer symptoms in the branches. So, these branches may become good indicators that your problem is shifting and contribute to the metrics that will evaluate your impact. The problem tree will serve as a guide throughout the design of your solution, program activities, goals and objectives and metrics for evaluating your social impact, so this is a critical step in the diagnosis of an idea, and the development of an effective intervention or new venture.

### Choose your root and write your issue statement

Next, use the issue diagnosis to articulate an issue statement. You can incorporate the symptoms and impact of the issue, but start by explaining the main root and its subroots where your work will be concentrated.

## Compassion

Let's pause a moment and bring compassion to the participants in this issue map, including the perpetrators of the issue and those affected by it. From a consciousness perspective, we are all similar in the ways that we suffer, deal with fear, get stuck on our attachments, experience fear, and undergo change. Let's go deeper for further insight and cultivate compassion.

Research shows that mindfulness practices, like meditation, change our perspective on others and our external situations. Called perspective-taking, we become more adept at considering how another might feel, building empathy and compassion. We also learn how to reframe our perspective on what we experience in a more positive light. This helps us find meaning and experience less distress in response to our challenges or another's suffering, increasing our feelings of kindness, compassion, and connectedness.