Strategy Planning
Tools in Strategic Planning
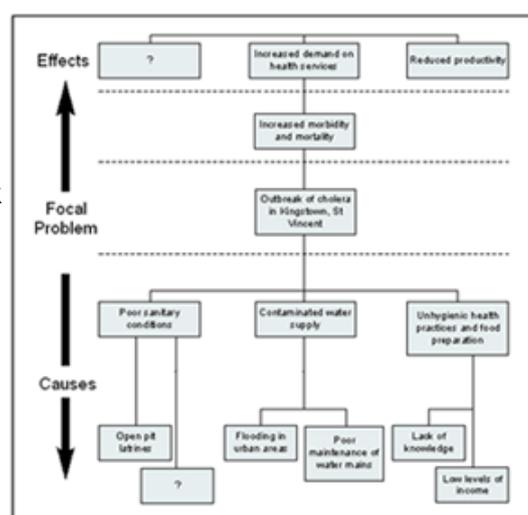## Problem-Cause and Objective Tree Analysis[1]

Problem tree analysis is central to many forms of project planning and is a recognised tool. Problem tree analysis (also called "situational analysis" or "problem analysis") helps to find solutions by mapping out the causes and effects of an issue – similar to a mind map, but with more structure.

This brings several advantages:
- The problem can be broken down into manageable and definable chunks. This helps you to prioritise factors and focus your aims;
- A better understanding of the problem and its interconnected and sometimes contradictory causes;
- It can help establish whether further information, evidence or resources are needed to make a strong case, or build a convincing solution;
- It helps to address issues that are happening now and how they can be identified and dealt with;
- The process of analysis often helps build a shared sense of understanding, purpose and action.

Problem tree analysis is best carried out in a small focus group of about 6-8 people using flip chart paper. 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'. Next, the group identifies 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, 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.

One Westminster, 37 Chapel Street, London NW1 5DP
Tel: 020 7723 1216   Email:general@vawcvs.org
Registered charity 295501 ◆ Registered company 2052268

Discussion questions might include:

- Does this represent the reality? Are the economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions to the problem considered? (see PESTLE)
- 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? (SWOT)
- Which causes are easiest / most difficult to address? What possible solutions or options might there be? Where could a policy change help to address a cause or consequence, or create a solution?
- What decisions have we made, and what actions have we agreed?

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 and resolved. In this way, root causes and consequences are turned into root solutions, and key project aims can be established.