



# Problem Identification and Prioritization

**Overview:** This activity helps a group review problems in the community, and then using a set of criteria it has defined, determine which present the best avenues for action.

**Purpose:** Choosing a priority issue from many pressing problems is not easy. It is a multi-step process involving analysis and negotiation within a group. Analysis is about asking why and probing for deeper truths. It is about weighing opportunities and challenges, looking closely at power dynamics and being honest about capacity. The poor choices that arise from inadequate analysis can be costly, and in politics, dangerous. This exercise helps a group to begin to identify and rank priority problems using a simple set of criteria. It can also help gain historical perspective on the problems and assess the impact of each problem from the points of view of those involved.

**Time:** 2 -3 hours

**Materials:**

- Flip charts
- Colored cards
- Markers
- Masking tape

**Credit:** Adapted from JASS' *New Weave Action Guide* and *From the Roots Up: Strengthening Organizational Capacity through Guided Self-Assessment* by Peter Gubbels and Catheryn Koss



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## Process:

### Step 1

#### *In plenary:*

- Introduce the idea of problem identification – a way of naming what is going on in our communities that is causing harm or injustice –and of determining which of those problems we will choose to address.
- Determine major problems: we will begin by listing major problems on a flip chart. Help participants see the difference between core problems and the symptoms of these problems. (For example, educational disadvantages faced by girls may be a symptom of economic hardships that force parents to choose which children to send to school).
- Here are two different ways to start:
  - Begin as a group by listing on a flip chart the sectors or groups (e.g. women, peasant farmers, small businesses, indigenous communities, etc.) that are related to your organization's work. Go through the list, asking participants to name the main problems in each different sector or group. OR,
  - Brainstorm a list of problems that are on the agenda of the groups involved or draw from a list of problems you have already identified in a participatory way.
- Write each problem on a separate card. If the problem is one that occurs in relation to several sectors, use a different colored card for each sector.
- Develop criteria with the group for categorizing each of the problems as “Most Serious,” “Seri-ous” and “Less Serious.” The criteria could include number of people affected, severity of consequences, frequency, etc. Write the list of criteria on flipchart paper.
- Referring to these criteria, ask the participants to sort the problem cards into the three categories. If you are looking at several sectors, keep the cards for each sector separate. Write codes (MS for Most Serious, S for Serious, LS for Less Serious) on the back of each card. Then shuffle the cards for each sector.
- Decide together on the time period over which you will measure change – whether, for example, it is two years, five years or ten years. Ask participants to think about whether, during this time period, each problem has gotten Worse, stayed the Same or gotten Better. Sort the cards into these three groups. Write codes on the back of each card according to the change category (W for Worse, S for Same, and B for Better).



- Make a Matrix with 3 rows and 3 columns. Label the rows: Getting Worse, Staying the Same, Getting Better. Label the columns: Most Serious, Serious, Less Serious. If you have organized the cards by sector make a matrix for each sector. Then place your cards in the correct box in the matrix.

### Sample Matrix

	Most Serious	Serious	Less Serious
Getting Worse	Malnutrition Domestic Violence		Lack of Transportation
Staying the Same	Corruption	Market too far away	No training opportunities
Getting Better	Employment Opportunities		

- Step back and look at what you see on the matrix (or matrices).

### *In buzz groups with 3 or 4 people sitting close to each other:*

- Discuss:
  - Why are certain problems getting worse and other improving?
  - What role is the government playing, positive or negative, and where?
  - What about other powerful actors in society?
  - What role are citizens and community organizations playing and where?

### *In plenary:*

- Reflecting on your conversations, where do you see the most opportunity for us to create change? Why? What opposition and what support would you foresee and from whom?
- Discuss and identify 2-3 problems that most people see as presenting an opportunity.



## Step 2

### ***In small groups:***

- Take each issue and have a small group work on it using the following questions. They should write their answers to each on a flipchart.
  - Who is directly impacted by the problem?
  - Who cares deeply about this problem and wants it solved?
  - Who is not affected but cares enough to support change?
  - Who is already involved or active on the problem?
  - Is there any group actively working in opposition or to block solutions?

### ***In plenary:***

- Have each group present back the key points from their discussion. The purpose of this discussion will be to help the whole group to determine which issue to work on.
  - What does this tell us about making change on this issue? Is there a clear constituency and set of allies? Is there passion about solving the problem? Are there opponents?
  - Does it help us decide what issue might be the best choice for us to work on?
  - What more do we need to know (e.g. More about the problem? More about our capacity? More about risks? More about potential allies?)
- Following this identification and prioritization, another layer of analysis is recommended once you have more information. In [We Rise](#), we are including further strategy activities that may help you.