

# TWP 'HOW TO' NOTE #4

## Defining the Problem

In order to effectively apply TWP thinking we need to first clarify specifically *what* it is that we want to know about. What is the one 'thing' in our program that we are most worried and unsure about, and/or that we think will block progress, and/or that we thus want to understand better?

While TWP tools can be applied at any level (the country level, the sector level, project, ministry, geographic area etc), most development practitioners find that TWP works best when applied to a clear and specific *problem* they are facing in their day-to-day work. By applying TWP to a specific problem, it is much easier to then identify what the program needs to change/ drop/ adapt or add in response – and in order to help bring about the change needed.

**However, focusing on and defining your problem can be hard....**

A common mistake made by aid programs is to jump straight to the 'result' or 'solution' without fully considering the multiple and complex causes of the problem at hand – especially the **political** dimensions of the problem. Sometimes this occurs because of project legacies (i.e. the common tendency to only make small tweaks at evaluation rather than drastically critiquing whether the proposed 'solution' is the right one at all to address the 'problem'), and sometimes it is because a donor or counterpart has asked a project to adopt a certain modality or 'solution' (e.g. train public servants). Whatever the cause, the key point here is that TWP both start from a clear, locally-defined and realistic understanding of the problem itself – from which we can then make educated guesses at 'solutions'. Not 'inverse problem solving' (i.e. starting with results and working back to causes).

Another common mistake is to define a key 'solution' as simply the inverse of your 'problem'. Rarely is this the case. E.g. if the problem is "the government lacks cash" then the solution must therefore be "more cash". Yes? No. This is not the solution at all – it is merely a re-statement of the problem. While dedicating more money in the national budget to basic services may be part of the solution, it is almost always not the full story. What if existing funds for service delivery are being mis-used and not even making it to the facility level? What if staff aren't equipped to carry out their jobs? What if there are no systems in place to actually account for funds moving between different levels of government?

Another final trap which aid practitioners fall into is designing long, elaborate and convoluted problem statements that list any and every possible issue affecting the achievement of their outcomes. E.g. "the key problems tackled by this project include: the weak capacity of providers to deliver services, low public awareness of their rights, weak demand by CSOs and public groups for quality services, poor government data collection on service delivery, unclear and inappropriate policy and regulations regarding service, a lack of political will and the uneven pace of decentralization". While all of these factors may indeed be important and true, they simply describe the situation, and none of them get at the 'heart of the matter'. What, in all this, is the *key binding constraint* to better service delivery that the program must try to influence?

So, as we can see, it is not only hard to come up with a clear problem statement – **but the way we define the problem has profound implications for how we apply TWP, and thus the types of conclusions we come to.**

In short. Poorly defined problem = poorly defined proposals and recommendations.

As such, it is important we take time to first develop a concise problem statement to which PEA thinking can be applied. Ultimately, in so doing, we want to be able to answer the following question:

*What is the key binding constraint to achieving progress?*

**Let’s take an example of a clear and simple problem statement....**

*“...The absence of environmental compliance standards have been identified as the key binding constraint holding back the potential of the Bangladesh leather industry, and relocation of the industry is the required policy action....”<sup>1</sup>*

**So, do you get there?**

There are many ways to reach a clear problem statement. But one simple way to do so is by working through a series of ‘so what’ questions, each time forcing yourself to be more and more specific (and less descriptive) in identifying what you see as the biggest single problem/ worry/ concern holding back progress. Let’s see how this might apply to the example mentioned above.

**....Tell us what the problem is that your program is trying to address?**

<p><b>Here the team has described a high level challenge, not the key problem/ binding constraint itself.</b></p>	<p>The Bangladesh leather sector contributes over \$1 billion to export receipts (around 4% of total exports from Bangladesh) and employs roughly 50,000 workers. Economists predict that if the leather industry continues its impressive growth, it may challenge the ready-made garments sector as Bangladesh’s most valuable export. However, the potential of the industry is currently being constrained by its location in an area of Dhaka called Hazaribagh.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>...Yes, but so what?</b></p>
<p><b>Here the team is providing more detail but confusing the state of play (the location doesn’t support growth) with the problem/ key constraint itself (the industry can’t meet international environmental standards and thus export overseas)</b></p>	<p>The production base in this location is unable to support growth and expansion, as it lacks facilities and infrastructure to meet international environmental standards, and the historical absence of industrial layout planning makes it infeasible to establish the required facilities in the current location. Bangladesh may lose the majority of its leather export market (close to 60%), as international buyers are increasingly choosing to avoid sourcing material from countries with poor environmental records. Major buyers, particularly from the European Union, have already warned that they will discontinue sourcing from Bangladesh if appropriate action is not taken to comply with environmental standards.</p>



**"Excellent meeting. I loved the quick fixes, the simple solutions, and the easy answers."**

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<sup>1</sup> Credit for all text relating to this example, and the example itself, must go to **The Asia Foundation**



	<b>...Yes, but so what?</b>
<p><b>Here the team have described multiple, possible causes of the problem – but not sufficiently narrowed the problem itself.</b></p>	<p>High end machinery also cannot be used in leather processing in Hazaribagh, resulting in lower quality finished leather; this has also deterred foreign investors from sourcing leather from Bangladesh. Lack of waste management causes serious health consequences for the workers in the industry, and the 180,000 residents of Hazaribagh. Liquid waste from the industry causes severe pollution of the nearby river, rendering it unsuitable for use in water supply, and exacerbating Dhaka’s water crisis. Furthermore, chemical-soaked solid waste ends up being used in fish and poultry feed, posing health hazards to consumers throughout the country.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>....Yes, but so what?</b></p>
<p><b>This is the single binding constraint – linked to a clear outcome, to which a TWP approach can be applied</b></p>	<p>The absence of environmental compliance has thus been identified as the binding constraint holding back the potential of the leather industry, and relocation of the industry is the required policy action.</p>