



# PROBLEM ANALYSIS

**ELD TRAINING**

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## ON PROBLEM SOLVING

Successful proposals are focused on solving problems.

Unfortunately, many organisations seem to be focused on activities rather than positive change.

It's natural.

'What we do' takes up a lot of our energy, and sometimes, as a result, we lose sight of the destination.

Many times people have asked me to examine their potential project ideas - and, so often, these are all activities, or just one action. For example, 'We plan to set up a home for street children' or 'We will raise awareness about contraceptive use among Commercial Sex Workers'.

Now, there's nothing wrong with activities - of course not. But none of these defines a problem to be solved or describes a positive situation as the end result. Thinking only in terms of activities, however 'good' or 'right' they may be, can have a negative effect on the success of any project plan or proposal.

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When we approach our project planning in this way we face some challenges. These can include:

## **Being unable to justify the proposal to the donor**

Working backwards from activities to explaining the problem can be hard work; and the logic is often difficult to justify. (And, sometimes the logic just isn't there.) It's much easier to start with the problem and select the activity - if it is appropriate - at the proper stage of project planning.

## **Demonstrating poor strategic thinking**

The development of a proposal that is based around activities - even if we can successfully backtrack to identifying a problem - will never be as convincing as one developed around the problem itself - without bias to one particular solution.

## **Not focusing on target groups' real needs and issues**

When we talk about 'doing', we are focused on ourselves - what WE do, how WE work. However, when we focus on solving a development problem, we turn our attention fully to the project beneficiaries - what THEY consider important, what THEY perceive as the issues they face.

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## DEFINITION OF A PROBLEM

Before we undertake our Problem Analysis, let's actually define those two words - 'problem' and 'analysis' - so we know (i) what we are expecting to identify (the problem) and (ii) what we are going to do to make sense of it (the analysis).

We are going to offer a two-part definition of a 'problem'. Here's the first part:

### **A problem is 'an existing negative situation'**

Is this an oversimplification? Perhaps it is. But bearing this in mind will help us to avoid mistakes such as describing problems in terms like these:

*'There is no health post in the village'*

*'There is no road linking the community to nearby markets'*

Both the examples above are not, in themselves, problems. Let's expand our definition of a problem a little.

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The second part of our definition is that:

## **A problem is 'not the absence of a solution'**

Both the examples suggest that there is a single, predefined 'solution' - a health post, a road - before the situation has been analysed. There are two dangers with expressing our ideas like this.

Firstly, by expressing the problem in terms of a solution, we close off our thinking to other possible solutions. It's like we are merely reacting to the situation by recommending a knee-jerk response.

True, it may be a solution that is commonly accepted, or may have given good results in other places / times. But each proposed solution must respond to the unique situation we are addressing. Secondly, donors will, at some level, assume that you have not really thought all the possibilities through; and that you are pushing your organisation's agenda.

Remember, proposal writers are problem solvers first and implementers second: we 'sell' the problem first, then the solution, and finally our ability to carry that out. By focusing only on the existing negative situation, we show ourselves to be neutral.

Looking specifically at what is wrong with the two examples:

*'There is no health post in the village'*

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This suggests that we have already decided there should be a health post, no matter what. However it raises questions such as what is the current health status of the residents? Does the situation justify a health post? What current health practices exist? What are the other options that could be considered?

A neutral way to express this could be:

*'Children of community X are vulnerable to preventable diseases'*

or

*'Infant morbidity is a serious problem in community X'*

Looking at the second example - *'There is no road linking the community to nearby markets'* - again, here we have a statement that assumes that there must be a road. Mentally, we (and the donor) could backtrack to work out that the problem is related to the economic status of the community but, again, it's unsatisfactory. The whole problem is described through the eyes of the implementer (the NGO or consortium that plans to build the road) rather than through the eyes of the end-user (the community that is facing the problem).

A better way to express this could be:

*'People of community X have limited access to ...'* - how it finishes will depend on the problem which the 'road' (if that's our solution) will address - access to markets / economic opportunity, health care, etc.

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## **AND WHAT'S ANALYSIS?**

Analysis is 'the process of breaking a complex topic into smaller parts to gain a better understanding of it'.

There are various tools we can use. What is important is that each we use is acceptable (valid for decision makers), effective (gets the best results) and efficient (relatively easy to use, fast and easy to understand).

The key problem analysis tool for proposal writers is the Problem Tree - which is a key stage in the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) and Results-Based Management.

It's easy to develop, widely accepted, and the results can be easily transposed when building the Logframe. (Note that when we discuss LFA we are talking about the approach - the process of developing the project plan - and when we say Logframe we mean the end result of the planning, the presentation of the plan in a four-by-four table.)

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## THE PROBLEM TREE

The Problem Tree is a major step in identifying what a particular project will address. It's a versatile, visual tool for identifying and prioritising problems, objectives or decisions.

The focal (or core) problem is represented by the tree's trunk, the causes are the 'roots' and the effects are the 'leaves and branches'.

It gives us a picture of the existing negative situation, its causes and effects. It also helps stakeholders get a realistic understanding of the problem.



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Tree diagrams can be used to guide project design and evaluation systems. They can help people to uncover and analyse the underlying causes of a particular problem.

The Problem Tree is often part of participatory planning methods, for example in stakeholder workshops, Logical Framework Analysis, and in participatory inquiry such as Participatory Rural Appraisal.

The end result is a visual arrangement of problems separated into to 'causes' and 'effects,' joined by a core, central problem.

The technique is an integral part of LFA and the starting point for all the analysis and planning which follows.

The Problem Tree is not an absolute. It is never static. It's a flexible tool, and different groups of stakeholders will come up with different Problem Trees.

You will even come up with a different Problem Tree at different times based on the same issue, so it's important to remember to be flexible - and do this stage as thoroughly as you can until you are satisfied you have a complete and logical analysis of the situation that reflects all stakeholders' points of view.

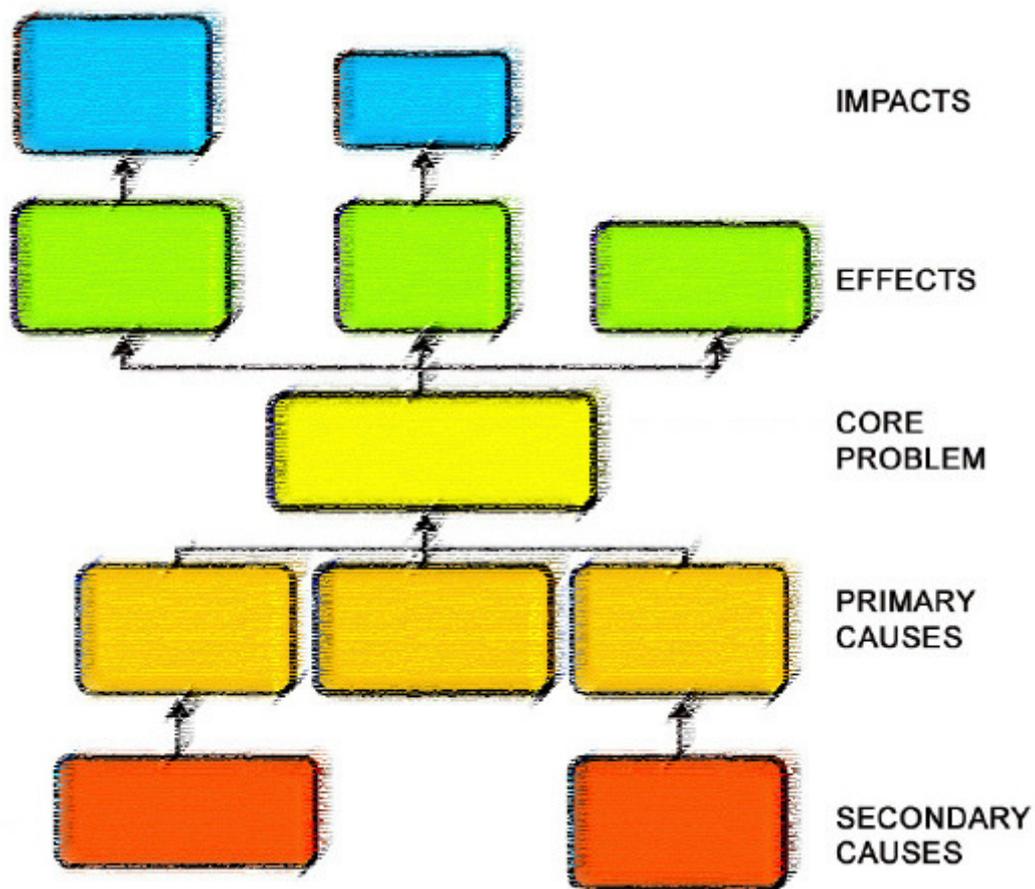
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## HOW TO DEVELOP A PROBLEM TREE

There are four main steps to developing a Problem Tree. These are:

1. List all the problems that come to mind
2. Identify a Core Problem
3. Decide which problems are causes and which are effects
4. Arrange the causes and effects in a hierarchy.



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## STEP 1 - LIST ALL THE PROBLEMS

The problems need to be carefully identified: they should be existing problems, not possible, imagined or future ones. Remember that the problem is an existing negative situation; it is not the absence of a solution - so try to avoid describing problems in terms of their solutions.

Make sure that you express the problems as negative statements and NOT just titles or key words. For example, '*Children have to walk two hours to reach the nearest school*' is OK; '*Distance to school*' is not.

## CASE STUDY: INDONESIA - RELIEF FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

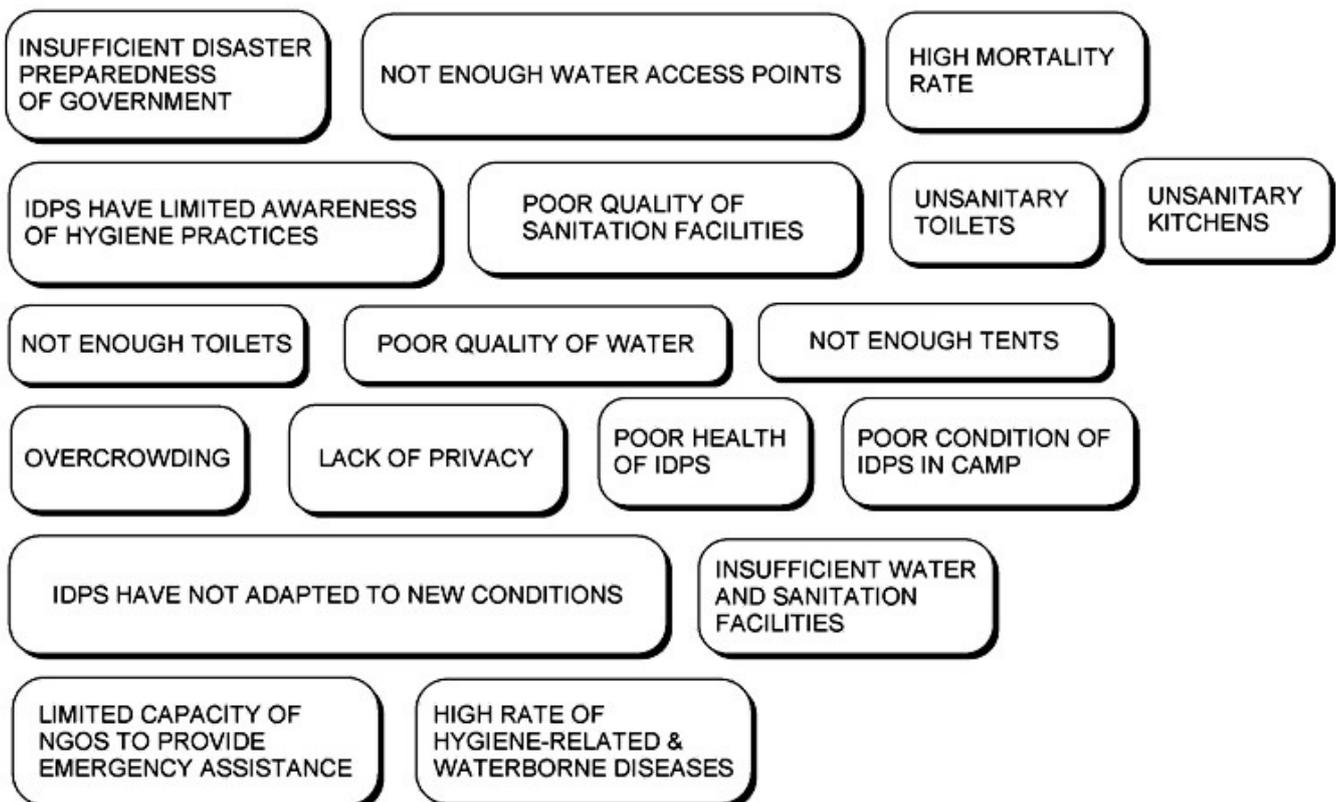
*On 17 July, at 3PM local time, a big flood hit the coast of Kampung, killing over 60 people and injuring more than 100. The most severely affected communities were those of poorer families living on the coast. Over 5,000 people were displaced and took shelter in temporary camps. Although the majority of IDPs (Internally Displaced People) had not lost homes, most were severely traumatised and not willing to return home due to fear of further flood. Of these, over 2,000 people lost their homes. The displaced were initially accommodated in 20 temporary camps and in local schools. These were typically overcrowded and lacked sufficient basic services. In particular, there were concerns that the unsanitary conditions and insufficient water supply would lead to significant public health risks. The government response has so far not been well managed and may not be adequate.*

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Below is the list of problems collected.

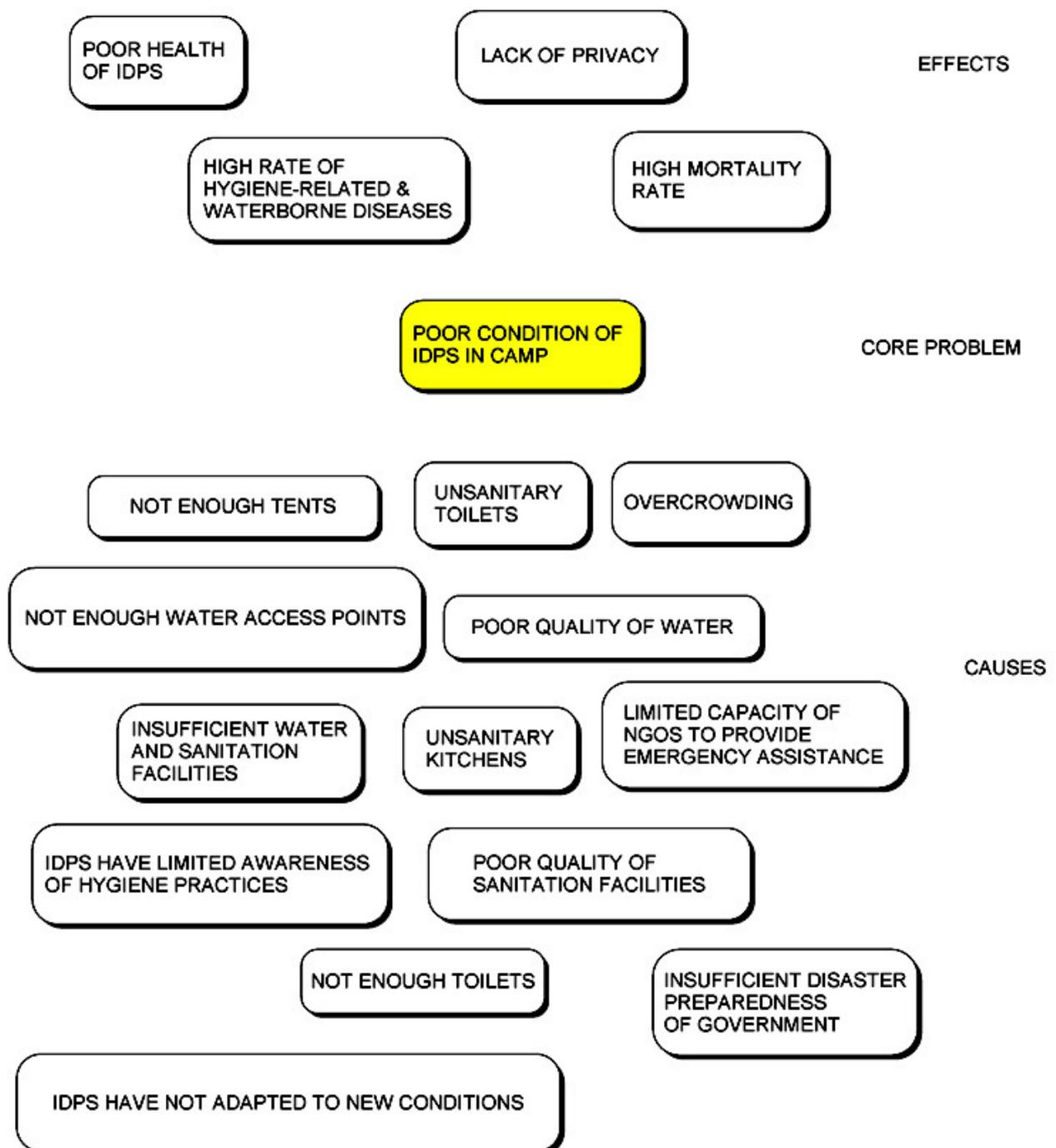
So what is the Core Problem?



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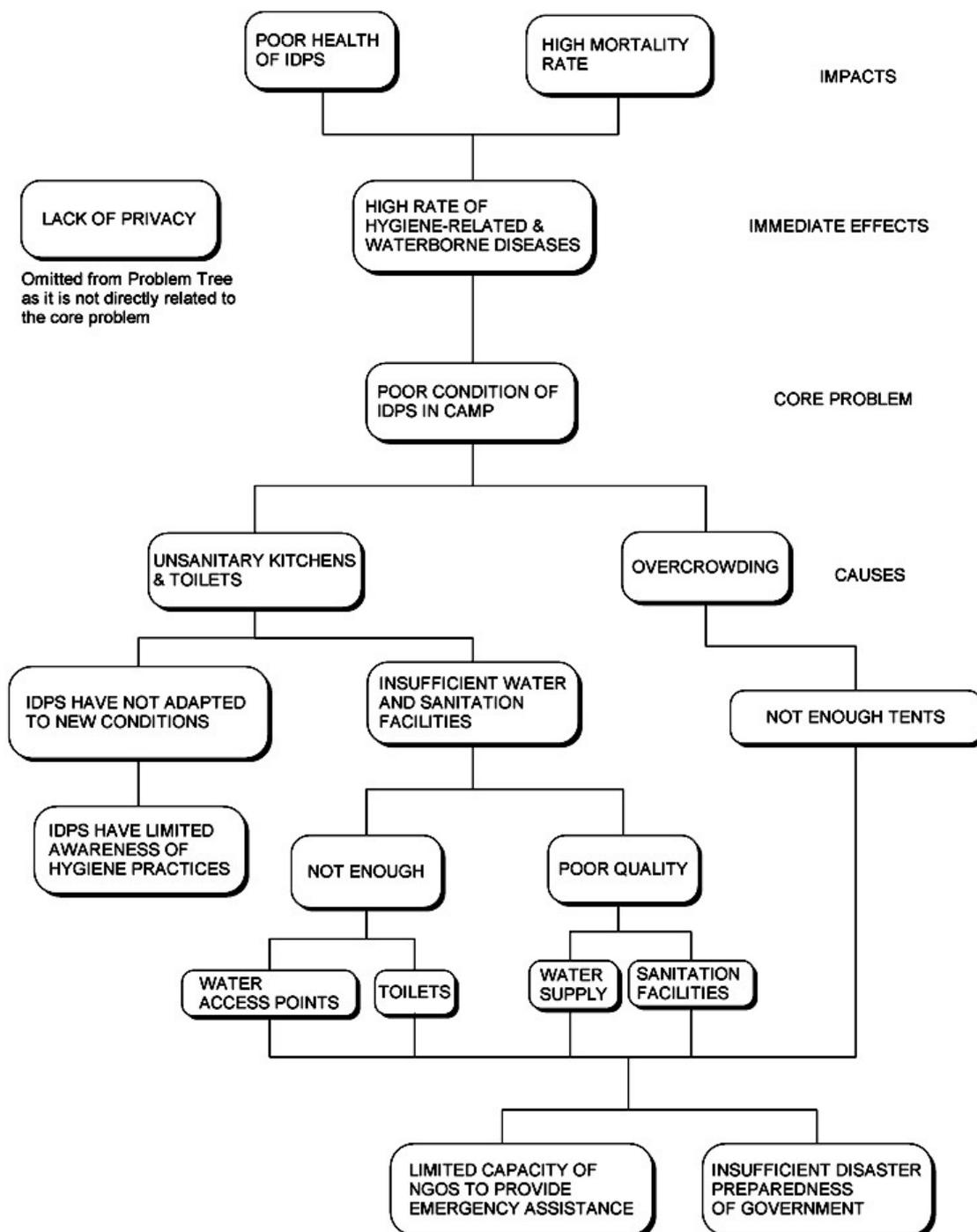
## STEPS 2 & 3 - IDENTIFY THE CORE PROBLEM & SEPARATE THE CAUSES FROM THE EFFECTS



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## STEP 4 - BUILD A HIERARCHY OF CAUSE AND EFFECT



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## CREATING A PARTICIPATORY PROBLEM TREE

If you wish to involve target groups in planning (and not just 'consult'), then you will want to involve them in the problem analysis. To expand the four steps above for use with end-users / communities, you can use the following process:

- Brainstorming: each group member contributes one or more problems drawn from personal experience. These can be collected on cards.
- Cluster the problems identified during the brainstorming.
- Identify the cause of each problem.
- Identify the consequences if the problem is not solved.
- Review the major problem orally.
- Draw a tree trunk is drawn and a word or a symbol that represents the core problem in the trunk.
- Draw branches and leaves in several directions.
- Participants suggest different effects of the problem, and each branch is used to represent a separate effect.
- A root system, symbolising the causes of the problem, is drawn under the trunk.
- The group suggests possible causes of the problem. Each root is marked with a picture or a phrase that represents a cause.
- Once the tree is completed, participants discuss the causes, deciding how much each one affects the major problem.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Neil Kendrick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.