

Association of Scottish Community Councils

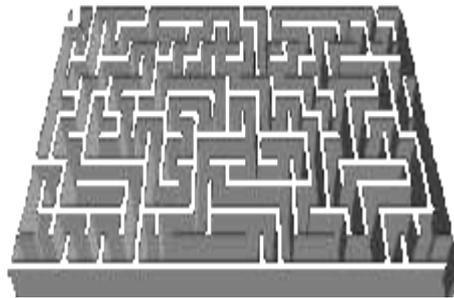


# Defining Issues

Decision Making Tool Kit

## Introduction

Successful projects are those that respond to community needs and resolve community-identified problems. As "experts," we may have the tendency to quickly identify what we think the problems are, but unless we ask, most likely we will miss some or fail to understand which are the most important to a community. You've got to know what the problems are before they can begin to be solved.



## Definition

Environmental, social, economic, recreational, political, and other factors that are perceived by a community or group of people to negatively affect or threaten a resource.

# Essentials

Identifying and describing issues is a systematic collection of information about opportunities, threats, and challenges that currently face a resource or most likely will in the future. Issues can be things such as point-source pollution, use and access on land, loss of jobs through transfer of development rights, endangered wildlife habitat, roads, housing developments etc.



To comprehensively identify issues requires knowledge of a community and its economy. It also requires bringing together a diverse group of people including landowners, elected officials, special interest groups, recreationists, resource experts, and citizens. The process of defining issues is both an excellent consensus-building activity and an important element of decision-making.

Remember, a group needs to have a clear understanding of their purpose or mission in order to better define what types of problems will or will not be addressed.

## How it Works

### **1. Gather the information.**

There are many tools and techniques that can be used to help identify issues including group brainstorming, key informant interviews, and newspaper article analysis. Getting on the agenda of pre-established meeting schedules

for local governments, civic or community groups is another idea. Surveys and focus groups can be used to elicit targeted information on issues. If a group brainstorming activity is organized with a facilitator guiding the process, be sure that all of the participants' needs and concerns are recorded exactly as intended and posted for all to read and discuss. One of the challenges is to keep participants focused and ask that they refrain from talking about solutions.

## **2. Categorize the list**

Look at the list of issues and group those that are similar. Be sure to systematically mark or label each issue so that no one's ideas are dropped. Initially, related issues should be grouped together to construct the broadest possible set of concerns, encompassing all points raised by project participants. If an issue does not fit under any particular theme, the group must decide if it is important enough to become its own category. Checking back with the originator to further discuss the concern and making sure he/she agrees with the group decision is important to gaining group buy-in to the process.

## **3. Capture the category**

For each topic heading, now have the group create statements that capture the essence of the issues. Similar issues are combined into one statement. The issues statements should describe current conditions that the group wants to change. For example, "Inadequate historic site protection is leading to the destruction of a number of nationally significant historic structures and landscapes." Depending upon how many categories there are, and the size of the group doing the work, it may be advantageous to break up into smaller teams with each team assigned a category. When the work is done, review the

statements together altering words and phrases as needed to that everyone agrees with what is stated and how it is stated.

#### **4. Do further research**

Issues must be thoroughly understood if they are to be used effectively to resolve problems. Examining the causes and effects of a problem, its immediacy, and its major elements are part of this process. Find out who is concerned and how they are involved, the scope of any plans that may affect a project, roots of the problem, what geographic areas or resources may be affected, and the timetable for any actions relating to the problem.

#### **5. Decide which issues to resolve**

Now knowing more about each issue, prioritize or rank the issues in the order in which they can be feasibly and realistically addressed. Other groups may best address some issues, some issues may be too controversial or problematic, and some may relate to ongoing, long-term problems that are difficult to resolve.

To help make these determinations, consider these three factors:

- **Magnitude:** Issues that are perceived to have the greatest impact on the resource or community will garner the most public attention and support for action. Issues such as dams and clear cutting forest lands will have immediately visible impacts on resources, while issues such as non-point sources of pollution and recreation use may appear to be less dramatic issues although they may have a more pervasive impact over time.

- **Attitude:** Attitudes toward the use of resources and concerns about the environment differ. If the public does not readily respond to a problem, an educational effort may be necessary. This approach can build support and a constituency for resolving the issue.
- **Timeframe:** Which issues are imminent or have already had impacts on the resources or community? If surveys or focus groups are used as part of the information gathering process, people can be asked to rank the original list of issues according to which are more important or should be addressed first.

## When to Use

- You want to form a consensus among a number of people about what problems or challenges are facing a community and its resources.
- You plan on building a strong public involvement campaign. Identifying issues launches setting goals and developing action agendas.
- You need to better understand relationships among problems.
- You want the group to focus on its purpose.

## Not Recommended If...

- You need a quick action in response to a clear, single issue.
- You cannot find a broad based constituency to present different views.