

THE CONFLICT TREE⁸

What is it? *This is an exercise for analyzing the causes and effects of a given conflict. It can serve as an initial step in preparation for later steps of analysis, such as systems mapping. The Conflict Tree works with one or more core problems, and then identifies the root causes, and the effects of the problem.*

Purpose:

- *To explore one or more conflict-related problems to see how they work;*
- *To distinguish between underlying causes and effects—which can help in strategizing (that is, working on effects rarely produces permanent change);*
- *To provide the basis for discussion within groups about what they can or should work on in conflict resolution; and*
- *To enable groups in conflict to discuss causes and effects.*

When to use it:

- *This can be a first step in conflict analysis, especially if you have only identified an initial presenting problem.*
- *Use this when you need a simple tool to provide the basis for discussion within a program team or among stakeholders.*
- *This exercise is best done by a group in a workshop setting.*

How to Do It

1. Hold a preliminary conversation with a group of workshop participants to determine what they see as the main conflict problems. These could be brainstormed on a flipchart or board, and then discussed to decide which of the items identified are Core Problems. Try to limit it to no more than two or three.
2. Draw a simple picture of a tree, including roots, trunk and branches—on a large sheet of paper, chalkboard, flipchart, or anywhere else convenient. Write one of the Core Problems on the trunk.
3. Give each person several cards or small sheets of paper (about 4 x 6 inches or 10 x 15 cm) or large “stickies” and ask them to write a word or two (or a symbol or picture) on the cards, indicating a key factor in the conflict, as they see it.
4. Invite people to attach their cards to the tree (using masking tape, if needed): on the roots, if they think it is a root cause; on the branches if they see it as an effect; or on the trunk, if they think it is an aspect of the Core Problem.
5. Once the cards have been placed, facilitate a discussion regarding the placement of the cards. Are they in the right places? If someone disagrees that something is a cause or an effect, ask why, and why the person who places it there thought it should go there. Try to reach agreement about placement of the cards.
6. Once you have completed a “tree” on one of the Core Problems, move on to the others, if there are any. (You could have only one Core Problem.) Repeat the steps above with cards, placement, and discussion.

⁸ Adapted from Fisher et al, *Working with Conflict*, Zed Books, 2000.

7. If you have completed several trees, facilitate a discussion regarding how the trees interact. Do effects in one tree reinforce causes in the same tree or become causes in another tree? Do we see similar causes in several trees? Are there patterns which emerge?
8. Following this discussion, you can use the trees as the basis for discussing potential points of intervention in the conflict. Given who we are and our mandate, what we do best, and our capacities, where can we make a difference? Is it to alleviate the effects (symptoms) or addressing root causes? How can we best get at the Core Problem? What have we done so far, with what results? Is there another approach that might be more effective?

EXAMPLE: Ethnic Dynamics in Burundi

