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Tips for trainers: 'But why?'

Introduction

This exercise is a variation of David Werner's exercise on the 'Chain of Causes'¹. I have used it with students in the UK, grassroots groups and health professionals in Cambodia and the Philippines to aid problem analysis and facilitate common understanding of such problems and their causes within groups².

Objective

To enable participants to analyse a situation, detail the causes of problems and to show how socio-economic, political, and environmental problems are inter-related.

Materials

Flip charts, markers, coloured paper (four colours) cut as "web" shapes, paste and/or tape.

Steps

1. Give each participant 8 pieces of coloured paper (2 pieces of each colour). Explain what each colour represents in terms of problems (e.g. red = political/decision making; yellow = cultural/beliefs and values; green = environmental; blue = economics). Divide the groups into small groups of 6 or 7. Give each group a flip chart and the following instructions:
 - on the middle of the flip chart, write the problem and draw a circle around it;
 - have a group discussion and identify the possible causes of this problem;

- as you identify a cause, ask yourselves 'why does this cause exist?' Continue doing this until you get to the basic cause of the problem. List all the causes;
 - taking the list of causes, discuss and agree what kinds of causes they are. Write all the 'political' causes on the red paper, all the 'cultural' causes on the yellow paper, etc.;
 - go back to your flip chart and paste on the paper starting from the problem in the middle. Arrange them as a chain of causes based on your discussion. Your final picture should appear as a big web with all your small colour pieces of paper connected to each other; and,
 - prepare to present the flip charts to the larger group (if there is one).
2. If there is a larger group, ask each group to present their flip charts. Discuss the similarities and differences and form a general understanding of the shared or common problem.

Note of caution

The facilitator should be familiar with the topic being discussed otherwise there is a danger of generalisation. There is also the danger of asking leading questions (beyond the 'but why?' type) which can bias the outcome.

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¹ Werner et al, 'Helping health workers learn'.

² See 'Partners in Creative Training: Training of Trainers in Cambodia', Jane Bañez-Ockelford, PACT Cambodia, 1995.