

Problem Identification and Diagnosis

M. Escalada

Field projects in resource management often succeed when key stakeholders – farmers, policymakers, extension specialists, agriculture officials, crop scientists, NGOs, national and international agencies – are involved in defining the problem and developing a shared agenda. To ensure participation, it is essential to jointly plan the project and develop objectives with stakeholders.



Problem identification is the first step in the search for solutions.

What is problem ID?

Problem identification is the initial stage in the scaling up process. To plan this stage, one needs to: 1) formulate key research questions based on the objectives of the project, 2) determine the data requirements, and 3) state how results will be used by the team.

Planning

Planning the problem diagnosis involves the following:

- Talk to key informants who are knowledgeable about the area where you want to do problem diagnosis.
- Review reports or secondary data and documents about the sites in which you intend to work.
- Consult with potential partners and stakeholders.
- Draw up a tentative field visit schedule.
- Contact persons to be visited to explore their availability.
- Find a local partner, preferably, someone who is knowledgeable and has status in the area, who can help organize the visits. He/she can:
 - facilitate local formalities -seek permission and approval from local leaders and authorities
 - arrange site visits, meetings, and focus group discussions with stakeholders
 - arrange transport & accommodation in the sites
 - estimate cost of field visits and workshop – transportation, accommodation, and meeting costs – refreshments, supplies, etc.



Conducting the diagnostic field visit

- Pay a courtesy call to local authorities, e.g., Department of Agriculture director, local government officials, heads of other relevant institutes.
- Explain the objectives of your visit.
- Walk through the sites to assess situation.
- Take photographs of the sites and various facilities of interest.
- Conduct key informant interviews and focus group discussions with various sectors – farmers, local government, service providers, etc. -- relevant to your topic.
- In group discussions with farmers, raise these guide questions to determine if it is worthwhile to work in the area¹:
 - Do you consider the problem facing you important enough to commit your time?
 - How many farmers in the area – village, district, and province -- face the same problems?
 - Have you or other farmers tried to find solutions?
 - Are there other groups in the community – NGOs, farmers groups – willing to commit the time and resources needed to work with you to find solutions or test appropriate technology options?



Reporting and validating observations

On the last day of the diagnostic trip, organize a small workshop or meeting to:

- share results with local stakeholders
- validate observations and any initial conclusions drawn up by the team
- jointly discuss recommendations and next steps.



Workshop

¹ Adapted from CIAT. http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/asia/pdf/aciar_monograph99_3b.pdf

1. Invite representatives from as many sectors relevant to the problem being diagnosed, e.g., Department of Agriculture, relevant research institutes, farmer leaders, universities, service providers, private sector.
2. Report your observations.
3. Encourage the participants to discuss the field observations and express their candid feedback.
4. Focus the discussion on these issues:

Key issues for discussion

- Is there really a _____ problem?
- What is the added value in getting farmers to adopt _____ technology options?
- What synergy exists between _____ and other crop management practices in the area?
- Will _____ options work in your province?



Follow-up activities

Once it is confirmed that there is a real problem, discussion can focus on next-step activities. These could be: initiating field research to validate technology options relevant to the problem, planning training and extension activities, promotion of validated technology options, or further research in search of solutions.

A word of caution

The site visits and group discussions may not always lead to follow-up activities such as further research or technology promotion. This happens when the “problem” turns out to be a non-problem because it is not serious, urgent and widespread. In such a case, the team should be brave enough to admit that the situation does not warrant investing resources in further research or extension activities.

