



EXTENSION

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Public Issues

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What is a Public Issue?

A public issue is a matter “of widespread concern” to the public at large because the issue impacts the general public or the broader community (Dale and Hahn, 1994, p.2). Often a public issue, or public problem, is controversial because there are varying opinions about how to resolve a problem. Hence, public issues have a gap between what is happening to what should or could happen. (Dale and Hahn, 1994).



As a member of a local community or nation, or a global citizen, public issues impact and affect all of us. Public issues can be economic, social, cultural or environmental. Common examples of public issues include homelessness, poverty, economic inequality, health care, climate change, etc. Public issues are complex, beyond one person’s control, and often require governmental policies to create a solution, since public issues require a systemic, collaborative policy change (Bardach, 2005). Public issues are often referred to as “wicked problems” due to their complexity, and contentiousness generating from various causes, and the need for a collective approach from multiple entities to find resolution (Rittel and Webber, 1973). While public issues are messy and challenging, and cross multiple policy areas, community members in collaboration with governmental decision-makers, can still play a significant role in addressing local public problems (Levine, 2013).

Distinguishing between a private issue and a public issue is important to understanding how a community might respond. A private issue is an individual problem a person may face in their personal life. A private issue is typically within one person’s or one entity’s control. For example, a person may be experiencing homelessness, which is a private issue, or a local business has gone bankrupt and left their property and building vacant causing potential neighborhood blight. In contrast, public issues are beyond one person’s or entity’s ability to control and often have broader societal impacts. In this example, the issue of homelessness is a public issue affecting many people and stems from multiple complex reasons. Likewise, loss of local businesses, resulting in vacant

lots and neighborhood economic decline, evolves into a public issue that often requires public-private partnerships and collective action among community members and governmental policy interventions to address underlying root causes (Mills, 1959). Although public issues are never a quick fix, engaged residents working with private and public entities can work toward resolving public issues and helping their community.

How to Address a Public Issue

Communities will always have an array of public issues, as they result from multiple aspects of community life. While local governments may undertake policies and ordinances to help resolve local issues, community associations, coalitions and advocacy groups can also work in partnership with private and governmental units to address public issues. A single community group or individual cannot resolve a public issue on their own. Communities need to work in collaboration with a variety of entities and interested parties to address public issues. A variety of approaches and methods are available for addressing public issues. This fact sheet provides one suggested process a collaborative multistakeholder group can follow for addressing public issues.



Step 1. Define and Frame the Issue

Defining the issue is a critical step in determining an effective response to the issue. Defining, sometimes referred to as “Naming” includes identifying and clarifying the problem in public terms, so others clearly understand the issue. Defining a problem is stating the issue in terms of *what is*, compared to *what could or ought to be* (CTB, 2024). “Framing” the issue sets the context and scope for the issue. Issue framing takes practice and works best when the issue is framed around core concerns and possible trade-offs (Rourke, 2014). How the issue is named and framed in public terms, and how this reflects what the public values, will determine how the issue gets addressed. (Kettering 2011).

To help define and frame the issue, it is helpful to:

- *Determine what is known about the issue? What data and information exists?*
- *Separate opinion from facts, opinion may drive people to participate, but facts drive workable solutions.*
- *Determine what information/data is missing.*
- *Gather broad perspectives. What assessments are missing? Those who are most impacted by the issue offer unique insight and ought to be included in the process.*

Example: Define a public issue, Child Hunger in our Community:

Example: Frame a public issue, What can our community do to help reduce child hunger?

When defining and framing the issue, define the issue in terms of needs and without assigning blame. Avoid the two most common pitfalls: a) do not include an implicit solution into your problem definition, and b) do not causally accept claims as the root cause of the problem. Causes of the problem should be real, based on some evidence and data, and not just assumed (Bardach, 2011). Although defining the problem is critical to resolving the problem, it is an iterative process. As more information and evidence is gathered, one may need to redefine the problem over the course of evidence gathering (Step 2).

Step 2. Gather Evidence and Diagnose

Gather data on the public issue defined. What sources of additional information can one gather to better understand both the problem and potential root causes, who else needs to be a part of the solution, and how can you reach them? The evidence gathered and data analyzed will help to clarify and define the issue and find a potential resolution, whether it's a policy, a project, a public/private partnership or different approach.

Regarding the example provided above, what data indicates child hunger is increasing or decreasing? What current options are available for children and families experiencing hunger in our community? When are children hungry-all the time, predominantly during off-school hours or at the end of the month? What additional evidence can help inform the issue? Who else needs to be involved?

Remember, public issues are messy, complex and multifaceted. Don't fall into analysis-paralysis, the inability to decide due to overanalyzing and overthinking. Refer back to the issue, focus on one aspect of the problem, and gather what evidence is considered reasonable to make an informed decision. Further clarifying the issue to focus on one specific group impacted by child hunger may help to better define and diagnose the issue. Once evidence is gathered, a more informed diagnosis begins to evolve, and the group is ready to start analyzing and deliberating on possible projects or steps toward resolution (Step 3).

Step 3. Analyze and Deliberate. Identify Possible Projects

Given the complexity of most public issues, there may be multiple projects or routes that could be undertaken to help lessen or resolve the issue. Focus on how the problem is defined and framed and identify potential projects that could address the issue. Ensure the projects or identified policies are feasible for the group to complete given the resources and time



frame, and ensure those most impacted by the project are included. Addressing public issues requires group deliberation and a group process to decide on a project. Deliberate means to engage in long and careful consideration. Analyzing the facts presented, deliberating on the list of projects identified, and carefully considering alternative ideas presented will lead to a feasible and group-supported project.

Brainstorm a list of projects that will address the issue. If necessary, obtain a facilitator to help assist in defining the group's goal to address the issue, and list possible projects that could be explored and undertaken by the group.

When identifying possible projects, it is best to first generate, then evaluate. Brainstorm the list of potential projects first, then the group can evaluate, analyze and deliberate their feasibility and impact on the problem identified. A variety of decision-making techniques are available to provide some structure especially for groups. Some of the more common techniques for group decision making include [decision tree analysis](#), [Delphi method](#), [Nominal Group technique](#) and [Consensus mapping](#). Once the group has selected one or two projects, the next step is action planning (Step 4).

Step 4. Develop and Design a S.M.A.R.T Action Plan

The action plan breaks down the goal into “actionable” steps that can easily be accomplished within specific timeframes. A number one cause for ineffectiveness among a group is lack of clearly defined goals and strategies. An action plan is a tool to help a group identify and work through steps needed to meet their goal. Select one or two projects based on the gathered data and group deliberation process from Step 3. Reflect and discuss the sphere of influence of the collaborative group and the potential impact of the selected project. Action planning should be considered a living document and a collaborative process to identify and list the steps needed to complete a project or meet a goal.



Write a S.M.A.R.T. action plan that addresses the problem. S.M.A.R.T action planning includes:

- **Specific**. Specific goals are clear and focused. What specifically do you want to do or accomplish with the project?
- **Measurable**. How will you quantify the measure of success? Be specific on what metrics will indicate when you have reached your goal. Some items may be difficult to measure. Find creative ways to determine measurement.
- **Achievable**. Goals are great, but is it achievable? Will the group be able to accomplish the goal?

- Realistic. Is the goal realistic given the time, resources, money or skills available?
- Timely. What is the specific time to achieve the goal? What steps need to occur in order to meet the end goal?

While developing the S.M.A.R.T action plan, be sure to include who on the team is responsible for each step, and by when. Big goals are accomplished by a series of objectives and strategies. Identifying responsibility and key objectives with time frames will lead to project implementation, and finally, the last step of the framework, implementation and evaluation (Step 5).

Step 5. Implement and Evaluate

After developing the action plan, the group has a roadmap for implementation. Implementation is the process of carrying out the plan for action. What are the steps the group is taking to accomplish its goal? Are the strategies meeting their objectives as anticipated? Most importantly, is the project accomplishing its broad goal of addressing the public issue? The process of evaluation is an important step that often gets ignored or delayed. While implementing the project, remember to include evaluation stages to track early progress or needed program adjustments to maximize ongoing success of the project. Identify areas that may need to be improved or modify areas to ensure outcomes are being met and the goal of the project is addressing the issue. A formal evidence gathering evaluation ought to be completed after one, three and five years to allow the program to flourish and grow. With periodic evaluations, the program will be accountable, with evidence to track and document impact on the public issue.

Conclusion

The process presented in this fact sheet offers one framework for addressing public issues. Public issues are complex, require multiple parties affected by the issue to be involved, and require a collaborative and diverse group to find workable solutions. Addressing a public issue is never easy, and government intervention and policy development is often not enough to resolve public issues. Collaborative public and private partnerships that involve a multiparty approach among community groups, private interests and local officials who follow a public issue framework are often the most effect in resolving public issues (Dale and Hahn, 1994).

Public issues are “wicked problems,” and no one individual, or entity, can take them on alone. Dealing with public issues takes time and group perseverance, and potential hurdles may still arise even given the best intentions. However, the messiness and controversy inherent in public issues should not dissuade people from engaging or taking on the challenging task.

Following a process to help guide a group in defining the issue, gathering the data, identifying possible projects, developing S.M.A.R.T. goals, and implementing and evaluating outcomes will develop the capacity of community members and bring positive change to the issue. Working together, both public and private interests have a

responsibility and role in being more deliberative, collaborative and engaged in addressing public issues (Levine, 2013).

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