



THE 5 WHYS

What: A simple tool to analyse the root causes of a given problem or challenge to understand how a project or programme should be designed to achieve the most impact.

Why: Diagnosing root causes requires that we ask – and try to answer – explanatory questions. These often start with the word ‘why’ and are framed in a way that positions one thing in relationship to another. For example, Why are people hungry when there is food available at the market? The 5 Whys method helps uncover problems, as well as eliminate unfounded or preconceived assumptions, by having the participants define a problem, then asking the question ‘why’ five times, often using the resulting explanation as a starting point for creative problem solving. In essence, the 5 Whys is a fast-paced version of the problem tree analysis.

When: This tool is great to apply during your exploratory phase, for example, after your needs assessment, to inform what part of a problem you should focus on to design the most impactful project.

Step 1

PREPARE THE EXERCISE

Identify the problem you want to focus on for the exercise. Ensure that it is as precise and concrete as possible.

It is beneficial if participants for this exercise come from different departments/areas but who are familiar with the problem you are trying to uncover and address.

Print out the problem statement or write it on a big flip chart to tune in participants on what they will be focusing on.

Face-to-face: Prepare and arrange the flip chart and markers.

Online: Write the problem statement on the Miro board. If you divide the participants into groups, prepare one board per group and a clean board to consolidate group work at the end. Before the workshop, encourage participants to familiarise themselves with the chosen online platform. If you use Miro, you can share [this short video tutorial](#) (3 min) in advance.

Facilitator tips

If relevant, prepare any background resources you would want to share with the participants to prepare them for the exercise (e.g., extracts from the needs assessment, insights from past evaluations or research). Do not bring long documents for participants to read – resources should be very short and provide participants with an overview of and key insights into the problem they will be focusing on. These materials should only serve as a support to participants if they should get stuck during the exercise.

Step 2

INFORMATION

PHASE
EXPLORE

TIMEFRAME
30 - 60 MINS.

MODE
BOTH

PARTICIPANTS
4 - 10

FACILITATION LEVEL
BASIC

MATERIALS
PENS, MARKERS, FLIP CHART
AND TIMER.

INTRODUCE THE EXERCISE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Introduce the participants to the timeframe and the purpose of the exercise:

- What are we going to do today?
- Why are they invited?
- What are their roles (if participants do not know each other well)?
- How long will this exercise take?

If more than five participants, split into smaller groups to create a problem statement. This helps bring the group together and focus on the specific challenge.

Briefly tune all participants into the specific problem they will work on during the exercise. Present the background resources you want to share, if any, and highlight the key insights.

If the participants are split into smaller groups, instruct them to write the problem statement at the top of each their flip chart/Miro board. This should be a single statement, formulated as concisely as possible. For example: “Our primary health interventions do not have the desired impact on men aged between 20 and 40,” or “Our Standard Operating Procedures are not being followed for more than half of our activities.”

Allow approximately 5 -10 minutes for this step.

Facilitator tips

Carefully explain the exercise methodology objective, as, in some contexts or social hierarchies, this type of repeat questioning could be seen as culturally inappropriate.

Step 3

THE 5 WHY QUESTIONS

Now it is time for the 5 whys:

- Ask the group: Why do we have this problem? What is the causal chain down to the root problem?
- Instruct them to write down their answer on the flip chart and discuss the answer as a group. Try and summarise it as another concise explanatory problem statement.
For example: “Our primary health services do not have the desired impact on men 20-40 because the services we provide are not perceived to be relevant,” or “Our Standard Operating Procedures are not followed because they are not known well by newer members of staff.” When you have a new statement, ask the group again: Why is that?
- Keep repeating this process for a total of five responses and five explanatory problem statements.

Allow participants 5–10 minutes to discuss each of the 5 whys.

Ideally, after the 5 whys you will have identified your root problem to support your further analysis, design, and planning.

Allow 35 – 50 minutes for this step to leave sufficient room for explanatory discussions.

Next step: Agree with the participants and how you will move on. Now that you have your root problem statement, you can use one of the idea generation tools, such as the [Round-Robin Brainstorming tool](#) to keep working on how to address the problem.

Facilitator tips

Keep reminding the group to try and make their answers plausible, credible, evidence-based, and objective. Remind the participants to apply a protection, gender, and inclusion, as well as a conflict sensitivity lens, when exploring the root causes.

If the group feels like they have identified the root cause of the problem before the five rounds, then you can stop asking why. If not, just continue the cycle.

Be wary of typical traps of generalising, such as simply blaming the system, a partner or lack of funding. Keep encouraging curiosity to dig deeper into the problem and to be specific in the questions and the answers/problem statements that you write down. This will help making the final problem statement to be as action oriented as possible.