

Solving Problems – or Implementing Absent Solutions

Ann K. MYLES, Sweden

Key words: problem analysis, land administration, project design

SUMMARY

Before embarking on land administration developments requiring large investments, a proper problem analysis should be made. But maybe the problems we experience most are not the real root problems? Maybe we define problems as an absence of the “obvious” solution, the one that we have already imagined? These scenarios can result in the creation of projects that do not address the real problems and therefore in the end might be less successful.

This paper describes the Logical Framework Approach method for structuring identified problems in a ‘problem tree’, and how this analysis helps to choose the right course of actions.

Examples from the land administration sector in three countries are presented.

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1. THE LOGICAL FRAMEWORK APPROACH

The title of this paper is lent from the project planning methodology Logical Framework Approach (LFA) ¹. Donors often use this method when planning to support developments in a certain sector in a developing country.

The LFA methodology for project design contains eight steps. They are:

1. Stakeholder analysis
2. Problem analysis
3. Objectives analysis
4. Plan of activities
5. Resource planning
6. Indicators/measurement of objectives
7. Risk analysis
8. Analysis of the assumptions

Each step is explained briefly below.

1.1 Stakeholder analysis

This step clarifies who the stakeholders are, i.e. who are those who are influenced by, and/or those who exert an influence on the area we are analyzing – directly or indirectly.

In land administration projects the stakeholders might for instance be:

- Landholders; formal and informal;
- Land administration organizations; management and staff;
- Other government bodies who use land information (e.g. tax authority);
- Municipalities, land use planners;
- Banks, real estate agents.

Representatives from all stakeholder groups should ideally participate in the LFA workshop for project design.

¹ Methodology description based on Sida's publication The Logical Framework Approach

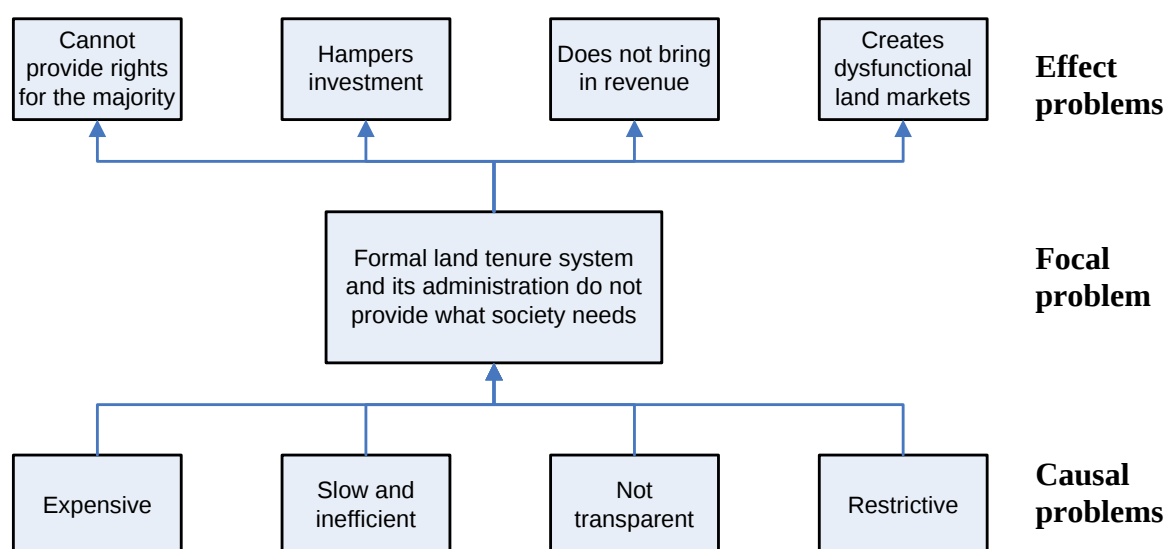
1.2 Problem analysis

In this step we analyze and structure the problems that should be solved by the project, and the reasons for them. Stakeholders identify problems related to the area of investigation, and one *focal problem* is decided on. This is the main problem that the project will have as its purpose to solve.

All problems are then structured in a so-called Problem Tree, where *causal problems* are those that lead to the focal problem, and *effect problems* are those that result from the focal problem.

A summarized problem tree from an African country is shown below. Its land administration sector was in need of improvements, and had potential funding from a foreign donor.

The graph is read from the bottom and upwards. The problems below lead to the problems above.



The tree was constructed in an LFA workshop. Each of the causal problems (expensive, slow and inefficient, not transparent, restrictive) have further underlying problems. All causal problems lead to the focal problem, in this case that the “formal land tenure system and its administration do not provide what society needs”. This problem in turn leads to the effect problems shown in the top row.

This summarized tree is general and can be applied to many countries. It is when we go deeper into the underlying problems that the tree becomes country and project specific.

The problem analysis is discussed in more detail below, and the main subject of this paper.

1.3 Objective analysis

The objective analysis is the positive reverse image of the problem analysis. Three levels of objectives are set; namely the:

- Overall or development objectives – what the project shall contribute to achieving in the long run;
- Project purpose – what should be achieved by the project;
- Results – the components and sub-goals needed to attain in order to achieve the project purpose.

1.4 Plan of activities

In this step the project activities are planned. Activities are the means to achieve the objectives, and thus the means to eliminate the causes of the focal problem. The activities, to be most effective, shall tackle the causes for the focal problem, i.e. the roots of the tree.

The activities are later timed (scheduled) and presented as a workplan, in a Gantt chart.

1.5 Resource planning

Resources needed to carry out the activities in the project are identified in this step. If the necessary resources are not made available the work cannot be done properly. Resources provided can consist of technical expertise, equipment, premises and funds.

1.6 Indicators/measurement of objectives

In this step the project group identifies indicators that make it possible to measure the progress of the project. Indicators should be chosen for each of the results, and for the project purpose.

1.7 Risk analysis

It is necessary to be aware of the obstacles that can lead to project failure. When risks are identified we can take measures to counteract them.

Risk factors are usually divided into:

- *External risks* that are outside the framework of the project and cannot be much influenced by the project team. Some risks can be so-called “killing factors”, meaning that if they occur the project cannot continue, it will fail.
- *Internal risks* that are possible for the project to exercise control over.

The end result from this step is a risk management plan.

1.8 Analysis of the assumptions

The success of a project often depends on factors outside its control, such as laws, policies, political will, institutional support and allocation of funds. In the last step such factors – conditions – are listed as assumptions, i.e. factors that are important for goal fulfillment, but outside the project's scope.

2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION ANALYSIS

The most important step in designing a development project is the problem analysis. Unless we get this right our chances of success are small.

2.1 Identifying the real problems

The basic questions that a problem analysis should answer are the following:

- What is the main/focal problem that shall be solved with the aid of the project (i.e. – why a change/a project is needed)?
- What are the causes of this problem (i.e. – why it exists)?
- What effects does the problem have (i.e. – why it is important to solve the problem)?

This analysis is often carried out incorrectly, resulting in a project design that will be less effective in improving a specific situation. One main reason for this is that the stakeholders think they already know the solution to their current problems, and this notion colours the way they specify the problems.

It is important to understand that a problem is not the absence of a solution, but an existing negative state. One should avoid using “lack of...”, for example “lack of funds”, when formulating a problem. These types of statements do not describe the current negative situation. It is not the lack of funds in itself that is the problem, it is rather what the lack of funds *leads to* that is the problem.

Other examples:

The absent solution	The (real) problem
Lack of pesticides in agriculture	Crop is infested by vermin
No computer systems	Difficult to find information

When stating an absent solution rather than a problem there is a risk that one will see just this *one* solution to the problem. In the first case, the acquisition of pesticides would be the solution to the problem. The problems of vermin or information access would not be opened up to alternative solutions, thus blocking us from designing the most appropriate actions.

Another common mistake during problem analysis is “inadequate problem specification”. A good example is “poor management”. This problem needs to be broken down in order to

understand *what the real problem is*. The management problem might include poor financial control, poor administrative skills, poor planning of human resources, weak IT strategy, etc.

2.1.1 Is IT the solution to land administration problems in developing countries?

Experiences from exercises on LFA during courses in land administration held in Sweden shows how difficult it is to go to the bottom of a problem, when we already have a preconceived notion of the solution. The participants get to write down the problems they perceive within the area they work, for which they are also to design and carry out a minor change project. The difference between a real problem and an absent solution is clearly explained and strongly emphasized. In spite of this the most commonly stated problem is “*no computer system*”.

The question of computerization deserves its own investigation. In Sweden, and in most developed countries, computerized systems were built from within the land organizations, by people who had the capacity to create the technical solutions, to keep them going and to continuously improve them.

We see, however, very few successful IT-systems in land administration in the third world. When donors leave, with the accompanying funds and experts, implemented IT-systems tend to break down within a few years. The land administration environment in developing countries is often not conducive to IT. Reasons might be lack of technical capacity, low salaries in government, problems with investment and maintenance funds, uncertain supply of electricity, low quality of information, etc.

If IT-systems cannot be sustained, shall we continue to advocate the use of them in land administration? It is difficult not to, when we know how useful they can be. But maybe, by looking behind the “lack of IT” problem and finding the real (underlying) problem, we might discover other solutions that can improve the situation and that are also sustainable. Those solutions will not be as efficient as well functioning IT-systems, but maybe more appropriate for the current situation in many countries.

2.2 Structuring the problems

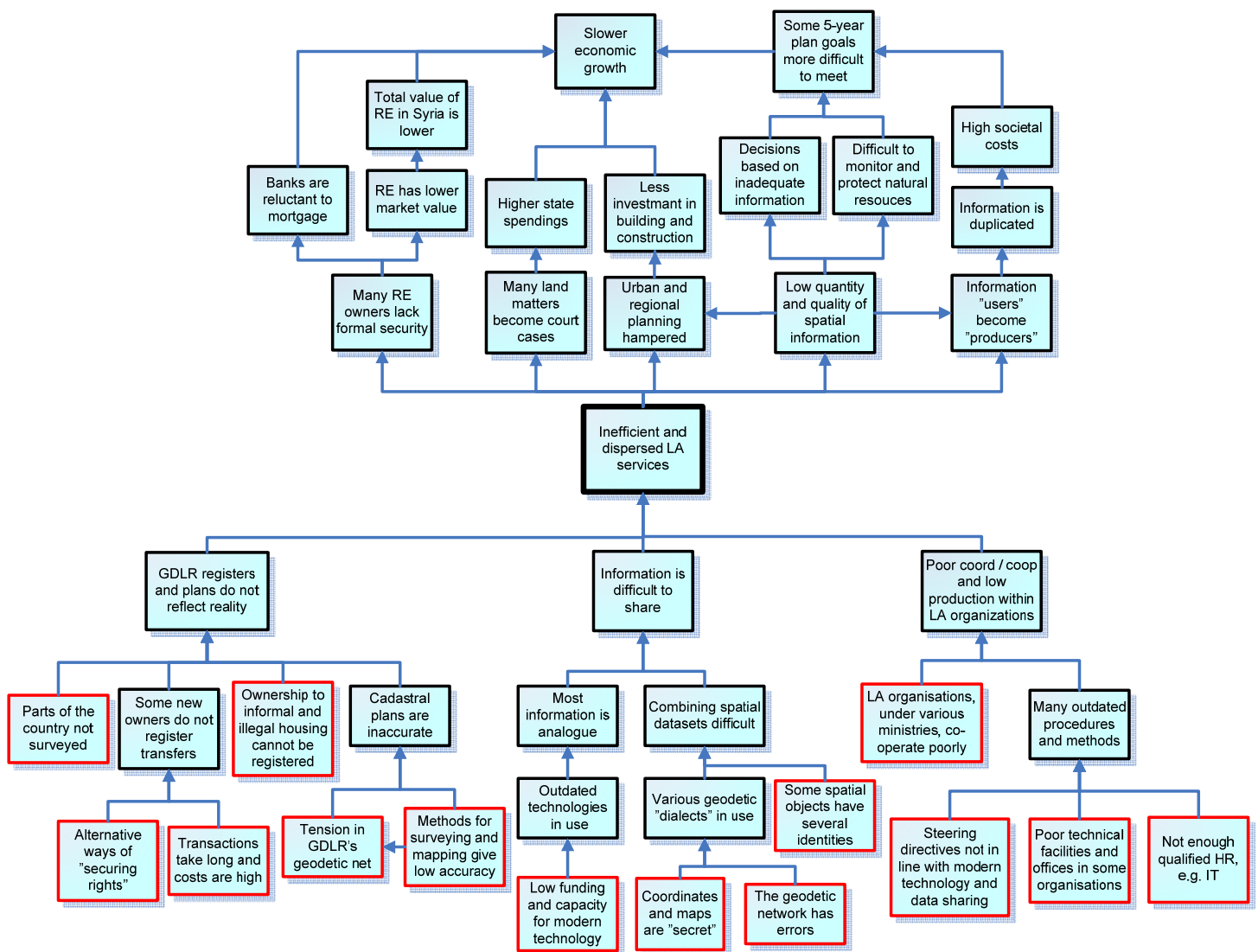
Constructing the problem tree makes it possible to clearly visualize the causes of the focal problem and its effects, and to find out how different problems are related to each other. We often hear, in daily talk, one person saying “the real problem is...”, and maybe another answering “no the real problem is...”. The fact is that most problems are related to each other in some way. One problem leads to another that in turn effects another situation.

This relationship between problems is important to establish. The possibilities of solving the focal problem is higher the further down in the tree the causes are tackled by activities. In other words, if we tackle the roots we have better chances of solving the focal problem in a sustainable way and designing a relevant project – on condition that the root problems are the real problems and not absent solutions.

2.3 Examples from the land administration sector

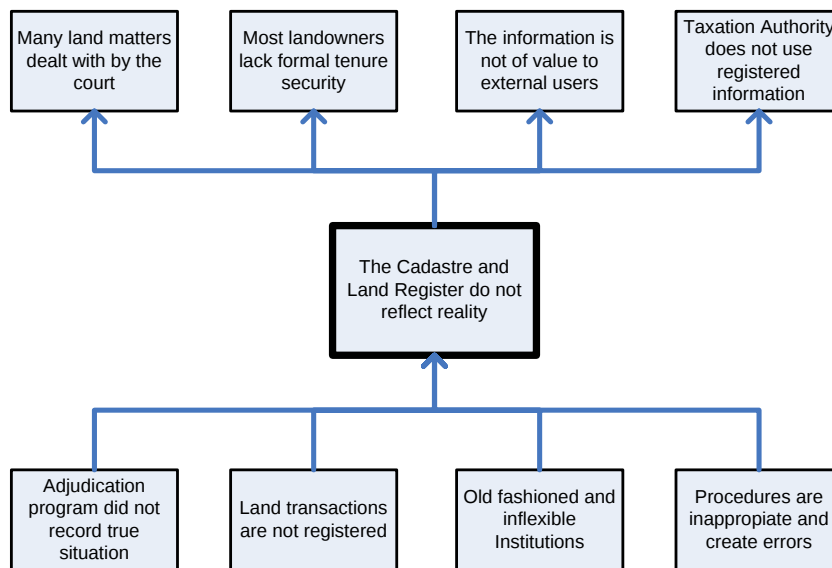
Below is a problem tree for a country in the Middle East. The situation there is similar to that of many countries. The tree was constructed after problem inventory in a stakeholder workshop, and extensive interviews with many of the participants. The result was later communicated to the decision-makers, and the tree provided an excellent structure for discussions on the relationship between problems in land administration and in the wider society.

In the graph LA stands for Land Administration, GDLR is the Directorate for Land Registration, and RE stands for real estate.



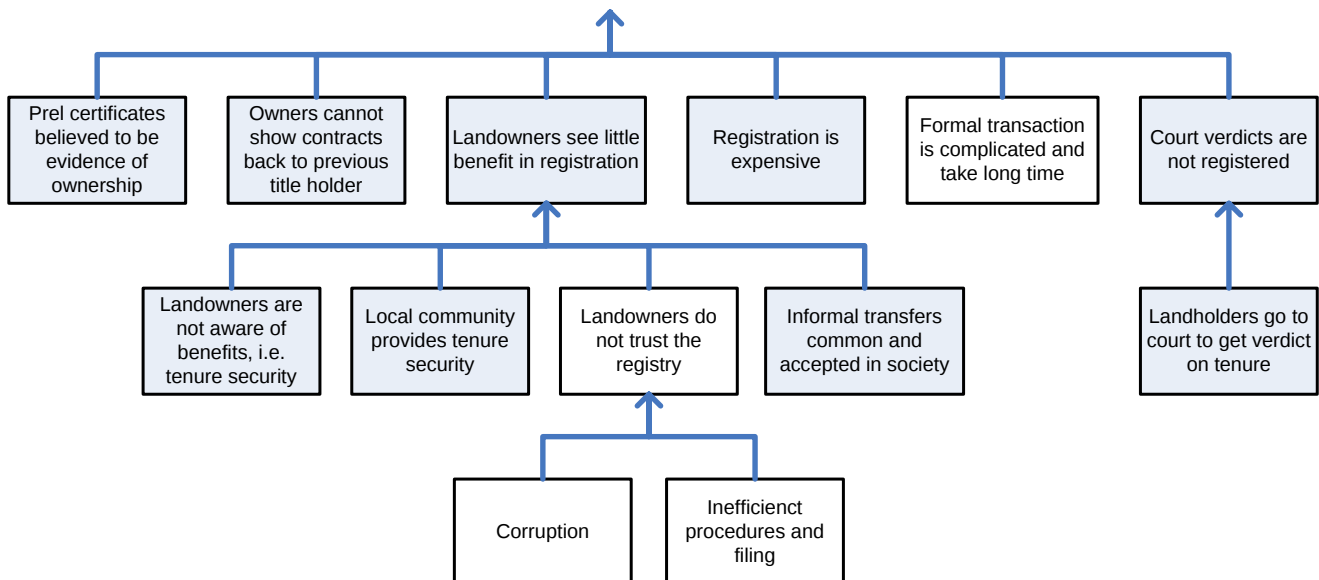
The lowest problems in the tree (the root problems) have red borders. Those were the problems that made up the basis for a project – in this example – to improve the land administration services.

Another example from a problem analysis is shown below. It is from Egypt.



The focal problem identified here is unfortunately all too common. Land institutions exist and they claim to have good registers, with procedures based on law. However, the registers do not reflect the reality on the ground. The people claiming to own land parcels are not recorded in the land register. The most common reason for that is that *land transactions are not registered*, after first registration based on adjudication, or after land allocations. Unrecorded sales or inheritance of real property take place continuously, and over time the legal registers deteriorate.

The graph below shows the underlying problems in this case.



CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that the LFA method provides a good tool for reaching a common understanding of the situation in a specific problem area. It works very well for designing land administration projects, and for communicating with decision makers.

This holds true, however, only if it is used correctly, i.e. that the real problems form the basis for the project design, and not the “absent solutions”.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Academic Experience: MSc in Land Surveying, Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm

Current position: Land administration consultant

Practical experience: Legal cadastral surveying, valuation for taxation, land administration systems development, implementation and maintenance, land management, project design and management.

Project manager/ team leader or expert in Zambia, Mozambique, Russia, Slovenia, Belize, Egypt, Tajikistan, Lesotho, Indonesia, Botswana, Kenya and several other countries.

CONTACTS

Ms. Ann K. Myles
AM Land Administration Consulting & Swedesurvey AB
Gnistens Gränd 8
SE-803 02 Gävle
SWEDEN
Tel. + 46 702 80 20 05
Fax + 46 26 65 18 19
Email: akmyles@gavlenet.se; ann-katrin.myles@lm.se
Web site: www.swedesurvey.se; www.lantmateriet.se