FRAMING THE PROBLEM

At the heart of effective problem solving, lies the ability to frame problems properly. This is a strategic thinking skill, a design skill and a system thinking skill, which are key to tackling complex problems (see Factsheet on Complexity and Systems Thinking). It is also a key element in the front end of any innovation process because it enables better understanding of a problem and its positioning that results in actionable outcomes.

Problem framing

Problem framing is a process of defining and presenting a problem in a way that shapes how people understand it and decide to respond. It helps to create focus and understanding of the problem to be solved, ways in which to better understand the causes of the problem and situates it in a way that generates solutions.

Problem framing is not just about finding solutions, it is about asking the right questions and approaching challenges with curiosity and empathy. Empathy enhances creativity by encouraging individuals to consider others' perspectives when defining complex problems.

Problem framing matters because it:

▶ **Influences action:** Framing helps clarify the problem, its context, and those affected, guiding the next steps — such as engaging stakeholders to explore their perspectives.

▶ **Shapes narrative:** Framing helps bring a complex problem into focus. It can help highlight the root causes, consequences and actors experiencing the problem.

▶ **Clarifies purpose:** A well-framed problem helps focus efforts and resources on what really matters.

EXAMPLE: GREEN CHARCOAL PRODUCTION

In many parts of Africa, charcoal remains a primary source of household energy, but its production is a major driver of deforestation, land degradation and carbon emissions. Unsustainable harvesting of woodlands for ordinary charcoal contributes to biodiversity loss, worsens climate vulnerability, and threatens rural livelihoods. At the same time, demand for affordable cooking fuel continues to rise in rapidly growing urban areas. There are many ways to frame this problem; below are four examples.

• **Health framing:** Smoke from traditional charcoal stoves contributes to indoor air pollution, causing respiratory illness — particularly among women and children. Clean-burning green charcoal improves public health outcomes while reducing environmental impact. Stakeholders: Health ministries, NGOs, urban families, women's groups.

• **Climate framing:** Charcoal production is a major source of carbon emissions and deforestation, undermining Africa's climate commitments.

Scaling green charcoal can reduce emissions, enhance carbon sinks, and support nature-based climate solutions. Key stakeholders: Climate funders, environmental ministries, carbon offset buyers.

• **Livelihoods and jobs:** Charcoal value chains are often informal, extractive, and offer little security or long-term opportunity for producers. Green charcoal can stimulate rural job creation, support smallholder income through biomass supply, and formalise an often-exploited sector. Key stakeholders: Rural development actors, youth employment programmes, cooperatives.

• **Gender equity framing:** Women bear the burden of collecting wood, cooking, and facing health and safety risks — yet are excluded from energy decisions. Green charcoal, especially through women-led enterprises, can empower women, improve household health, and free time for education and work. Key stakeholders: Gender-focused donors, women's rights organisations, community health advocates.

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While problem framing can be done on an individual level, it is typically practiced across innovation teams so that they can achieve alignment and work more cohesively toward an agreed-upon outcome. Understanding the context surrounding a problem is paramount as it lays the foundation for developing effective solutions.

Framing as a process

Problem framing is the process of systematically exploring and analysing an issue to better understand, define and prioritise it. It involves questioning one's own assumptions and considering multiple perspectives by engaging with both existing data—which may be contradictory or unclear—and the diverse stakeholders affected by the problem. Through this combination of research and dialogue, insights are gathered and synthesised, allowing for deeper sense-making. These insights are then used to reframe the problem in a way that is more accurate, focused and actionable.

Steps in problem framing

1. Identify the areas of focus or issue: Unpack the problem at hand. Distinguish between symptoms and root causes to ensure the framing addresses the underlying issue.

Key questions to ask are:
a. Why does this problem exist? What are the underlying causes?
b. Why does this problem matter?
c. To whom does it matter?
d. What are root causes of the problem and what are symptoms?

2. Understand the context: Gather background information, including social, political, cultural and environmental dynamics that shape the problem. This includes interrogating the existing frame – ask how a problem is currently being described in media, policy or public discourse. When benefits from this framing? Who is left out?

Key questions to ask:
a. What is the background to the problem?
b. What data or research can help us understand the problem more deeply?

c. What are the systemic or structural issues causing this problem?
d. What are the key drivers of the problem?
e. How has this problem been tackled in the past? What solutions worked and which ones didn't, and why?

3. Define stakeholder perspectives: Understand how different groups perceive/experience the issue. This includes those directly affected and those with the power to influence change.

Key questions to ask are:
a. Who are the primary and secondary stakeholders in this situation?
b. How do different stakeholders perceive the problem?
c. What are the diverse needs, interests and values of each stakeholder?
d. Who has the power to influence or solve this problem?
e. What biases might influence how stakeholders understand this problem?

4. Choose the framing angle: Select the lens through which the issue will be presented. This could be economic, environmental, social or cultural, depending on the audience and objectives. Experiment with frames using justice, climate, economic, gender, etc. to explore new angles or solutions. See example below.

This process clarifies next steps — such as identifying gaps in knowledge or areas needing deeper research. Only with a full understanding of the problem can effective solutions emerge.

5. Craft a clear problem statement: Develop a concise message that encapsulates the problem, its significance and the need for action.

EXAMPLE: POLLUTION IN AFRICA

If we frame the issue too broadly—for example, by simply stating that "pollution in Africa is a major issue"—the problem remains vague and hard to tackle. It doesn't specify what kind of pollution, where it's happening, who is affected or what the root causes are. A more effective framing might be: "How might we reduce plastic pollution in informal settlements in Nairobi, where lack of waste infrastructure is harming human health and clogging waterways?"

This version is focused and actionable. It identifies the type of pollution (plastic), the location (Nairobi's informal settlements), the impact (health risks and blocked waterways) and a core underlying issue (lack of infrastructure). The same issue can be framed in different ways depending on the angle of intervention.

An economic frame might ask: "How might we create green jobs for youth by turning plastic waste into building materials in African cities?" A public health frame could be: "How might we prevent respiratory and waterborne diseases in children caused by unmanaged plastic waste in low-income neighbourhoods?" From a justice perspective, we might ask: "How might we ensure that waste management systems in African cities serve both affluent and marginalised communities equally?"

Common framing traps to avoid

▶ **Oversimplification:** Reducing complex issues to binary narratives (e.g. good vs evil) can obscure important nuances and exclude alternative solutions.

▶ **Deficit framing:** Focusing only on what's wrong can lead to disempowerment. Pairing the problem with stories of resilience and change helps foster action.

▶ **Blaming individuals:** Framing problems as personal failures (e.g. poor farmers need training) can ignore structural causes like land policy, market access, or colonial legacies.

Conclusion

Problem framing is not a one-time activity at the beginning of a project, it is an iterative process that will continue throughout the project, hence the notion of reframing. Innovators should expect their understanding of the problem to change multiple times throughout the design process. If it is not changing, then there is a need for more data or stakeholder input.