

UNIT 3 – FLESHING OUT THE PROBLEM – TWO EXAMPLES

Getting Started

As noted in Unit 1, in this course, we are viewing problem solving as a two-part exercise. In the first instance, we are seeking to understand what the problem really is, then, having clarified the problem, the intention is to develop an appropriate solution for it.

As also stated earlier, while not ignoring the second problem-solving task, we are placing greater emphasis on finding out what the problem is, in other words, on investigating the problem. In this unit, we examine two pieces of work which, while not directly fitting the criteria to be considered as projects, are highlighting problem situations.

The first is a video-recording of an interview with the author of a handbook on breastfeeding. This interview took place in Trinidad and Tobago. The second is a paper that combines the reports of six case studies that examine street vending in selected African cities.

Learning Objectives

- ❖ *Identify and describe problems highlighted in everyday real-world experiences.*
- ❖ *Critique a video-taped interview in which problems were discussed.*
- ❖ *Distinguish between problems reported in a research paper and descriptions of the operations in which the problems were observed.*
- ❖ *Practise writing a problem statement and project objective using information from the interview.*

3.1 The interview: why a handbook on breastfeeding?

In this interview, the author (the interviewee) throws some light on the issues that influenced her decision to publish *A Practical Handbook for Breastfeeding Moms*. The purpose of the interview therefore is to provide the interviewee with an opportunity to give details about the problem. This is actually Part 1 of the interview. Part 2, which will be included in Unit 5, focuses on the solution, that is, the book itself.

The interview was built around the main questions listed below. However, the interviewer included other questions following up on each of these. You should also pay attention to those subsidiary questions as well as their responses. Following are the main questions:

1. What is your work experience?
2. What factors led you to write this book?
3. Breastfeeding is a natural activity. Some would say that in days gone by, mothers did not need to be taught how to breastfeed. Why has it become necessary now?
4. Does the book target any particular group of women?
5. In addition to your own observations from your work experience, were there any other persons who also recognized the problem that you sought to address in the handbook?
6. Are there any arrangements in the hospitals to inform mothers of your group?
7. You chose to address the problem by writing and publishing a book. What are the benefits of taking this route above any other?

Resource Material 3.1

Problem-solving, Part 1: Video-taped interview with author of *A Practical Handbook for Breastfeeding Moms*

Self-assessment exercise 3.1

Make a list of all the issues that the author raised, which influenced her decision to write the book on breastfeeding.

- Did all the issues identified come from the author's personal experience as a professional?
- If not, what was/were the other source(s) and what were the issues from those sources? How do the two sets compare? Any similarities, any differences?
- Having listened to the entire interview, is there any question that you think should have been included, or any already there that could be improved?
- In addition, is there any aspect of the topic that you would have liked to get more information about, in light of the stated purpose of the interview?
- What are your views of the author's reasons for using the print medium (a handbook) as the vehicle for addressing the problem?

Self-assessment exercise 3.2

In this first part of the interview, the author has given us all the reasons why she decided to produce her handbook on breastfeeding. Basically, what she has described for us is a problem that has many dimensions. Based on information gleaned from the interview, you are now required to identify a **single** problem idea that is suitable for providing the basis for a project geared exclusively towards the investigation of a problem.

Note that you are only required to set the basis for an **investigation**. You are not required to identify a solution of your own, neither should you link your problem idea to the solution that the interviewee developed.

For this exercise therefore, you will

- Identify a single problem related to the practice of breastfeeding.
- Write a brief problem statement, drawing on relevant information obtained from the interview.
- Develop the project objective.

3.2 The background paper on street vending in six African cities

The second work is a background paper that synthesises six cases studies on street vending in African cities. The paper was developed to feed into a larger World Bank publication titled *World Development Report* on the theme *Investment Climate*. The purpose of the paper was to assess the business/environment constraints that street vendors in cities in six African countries experienced. The countries were Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and South Africa. The following excerpt from the introduction of the paper explains further.

The main interest of the World Bank is the assessment of constraints to business growth in the informal economy. Those working in the informal economy work in unregulated and unprotected environments that are not conducive to business. The synthesis of the six case studies assesses the business/environment constraints for street vendors and the responses made by various stakeholders including the vendors themselves.

Following are some of the key details that the author provides in setting the context of the paper:

- While acknowledging differences in the political make-up of the respective countries, the author highlights one important feature that is common to five of them. Apart from Cote d'Ivoire, the others were previously British colonies with laws to control the business operations of the local population.
- In many instances, the population of the cities in which the studies were carried out was over 1 million. Typical locations for vending in these cities were the areas around markets, taxi parks and bus terminals.
- Street vending, though a key source of employment for large sections of the population, and a significant contributor to the urban economy, is generally not accounted for in the economic statistics of the country.
- Women dominate the street vending sector.

Resource material 3.2

Mitullah, W.V. *Street vending in African cities: a synthesis of empirical findings from Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa*. (University of Nairobi, Kenya, August, 2003).

Self-assessment exercise 3.3

First read the entire paper then pay special attention to Section 2 (Street Vending Activities) and Section 4 (Infrastructure and Service Provision). In each section, identify two, but no more than three problems that vendors experienced in the conduct of their work and which hampered the success of their business ventures.

Briefly summarise each in your own words.

As you engage in this exercise, you should note that some parts of the information in the respective sections are simply descriptions of the street vending activities and the conditions surrounding these operations. Ensure that you are able to distinguish between these descriptions and the problems that the vendors encounter. Your task is to identify the problems, not describe the street vending operations.

Self-assessment exercise 3.4

- 1. Compare and contrast the two types of problems reviewed in this Unit.*
- 2. Find out all you can about the term, the informal economy.*

3.3 Some pertinent details

There are some important points emerging from these works that warrant attention. First, while neither can be taken as an example of a project report, they both provide, in some detail, descriptions of problems and we are able to see different sides of each problem.

Secondly, both are most definitely authentic real-world issues. Consequently, most of the information we obtain about them originate from real-world settings. In the case of the breastfeeding issue, we hear about it from someone whose professional responsibilities put her in person-to-person contact with nursing mothers; thus, the information she was communicating was based on direct observation of those experiencing the problem. In addition, there were occasions when she would receive information through informal, often un-planned interactions with mothers or persons close to them. Overall therefore, the information made available through the video-taped interview represents data coming from a primary source.

With regard to the background paper on street vending in African cities, the author states that it relies on both primary and secondary data. A large part of the information that she summarises was drawn from data collected from people, including vendors themselves, in each of the six cities and reported in the respective case studies. However, this is not the only type of data in the paper. The content of Section Three on Institutional Frameworks is mainly secondary data, made up largely of policies and regulations through which the governments controlled the operations of the street vendors and which Mitullah describes as being outdated and restrictive.

One notes that even though the paper is based on a synthesis of case studies, namely studies that entail some measure of research activity, there is little or no evidence of the methods used in the case studies to collect the data. What the author of the background paper presents are summary descriptions of the findings and these are largely devoid of the measures typically used (for example percentages, frequency counts) when reporting data of this type. Nonetheless, for our purposes, the main value is the detail the paper provides about the problems that street vendors in the selected African countries face in their day-to-day operations.

Key Takeaways

- Real-world problems occur at both a micro (as in issues related to mothers breastfeeding new-born babies) and a macro level (as in issues related to street vending in large cities).
- Investigating a problem must be clearly distinguished from developing a solution to a problem.
- The interview is a useful tool for collecting primary data. Its success depends to a large extent on how clearly the questions are framed.
- Primary and secondary data may be combined in a single work and one needs to be able to distinguish between the two.