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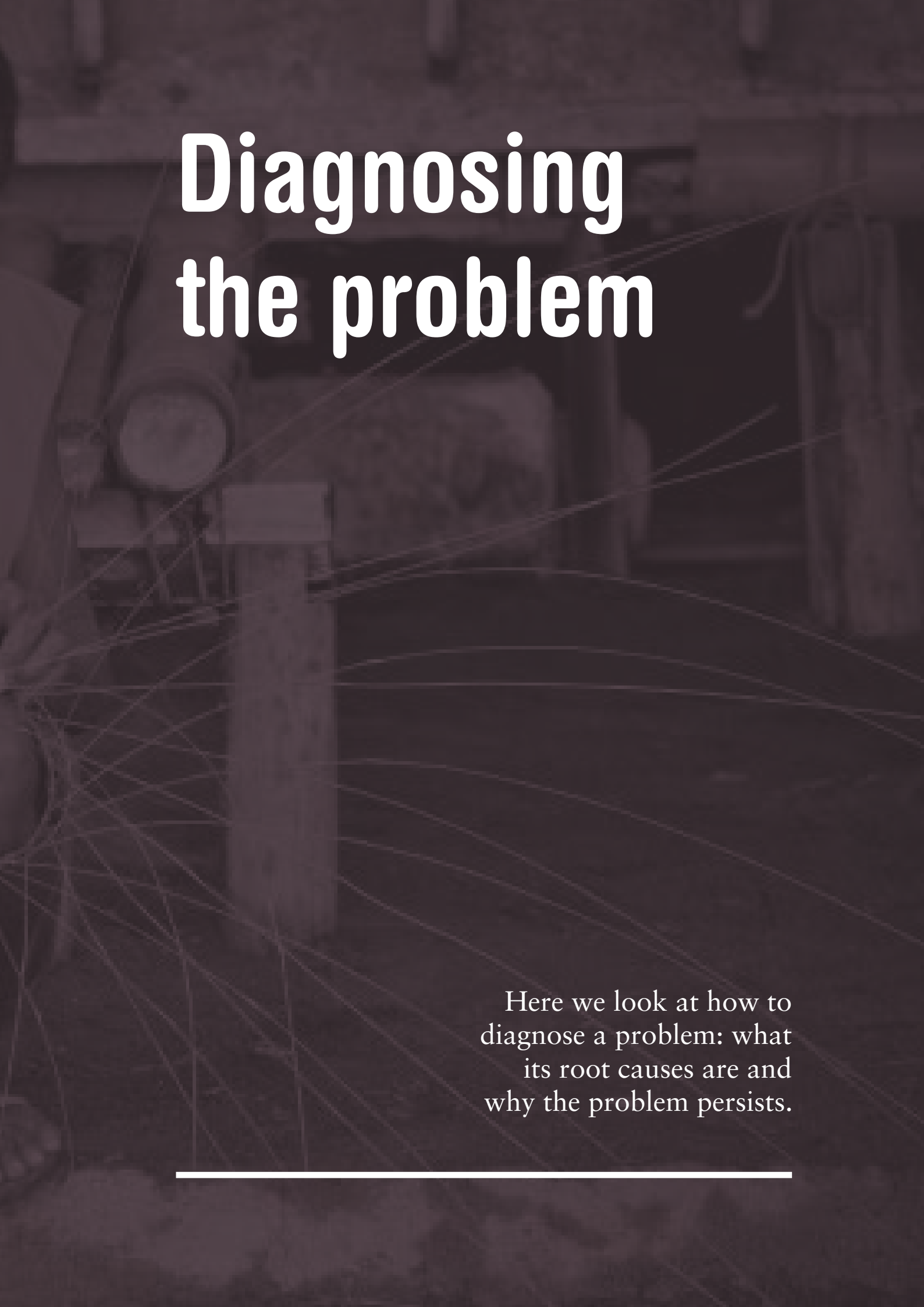

Diagnosing the problem

Here we look at how to diagnose a problem: what its root causes are and why the problem persists.

1. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The pressure to deliver results often limits the amount of time available to define the root cause of a problem. This is a false economy, as it can lead to projects and programmes that address symptoms rather than causes. ROMA helps you understand the root cause of the initial problem you have identified. Two different options are presented below. The 'five whys' technique is useful for a first approximation at finding the root cause. A fishbone diagram helps you delve into the issue in more detail.

A first approximation: the 'five whys' technique

The 'five whys' technique asks you to identify the initial problem and then answer why it is a problem five times. After the fifth 'why' you will have reached a real depth of understanding about the issue. This helps go beyond the initial issues or those that are immediately apparent, to work out what is causing the problem and where the most effective entry points are. Box 3 provides an example from a project on public expenditure and financial accountability (PEFA).

Delving into the detail: fishbone diagrams

The 'five whys' technique may give you sufficient information to begin to construct a robust objective for your policy-influencing work. However, if it is clear the problem contains several different components that need to be broken down, a fishbone diagram can help you get into the detail (see Box 4). Sticky notes are helpful to brainstorm and group the sub-issues that together contribute to the main issue you are trying to address.

Box 3: Five whys in practice

Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) indicators are widely used to assess whether a country has the tools to deliver good fiscal discipline, to allocate its resources strategically and to use its resources for service delivery efficiently. A suite of indicators is used to make these assessments (see www.pefa.org), one of which relates to public sector procurement, which we explore here.

The initial problem statement might be:

'the problem is that we get a D on the PEFA procurement indicator, because we do not have a law requiring competitive bidding across government'.

1. Why does this matter?

Without this law there is an incentive not to use competitive bidding in procurement deals.

2. Why does 1. matter?

Without this incentive, most procurement deals are currently done through sole source methods.

3. Why does 2. matter?

Sole source methods can increase corruption and lead to higher procurement costs and lower quality.

4. Why does 3. matter?

We have evidence that many procurement deals have been overly costly and goods are poorly provided.

5. Why does 4. matter?

High-cost, low-quality procurement is undermining the provision of key services across government.

This process that the initial specification of the problem – the need to introduce an externally defined 'best practice' to mandate competitive bidding – is in fact prompted by the need to improve the cost and quality of procurement. The latter problem is much more complex but is the root cause that needs solving. However, it is unlikely to be addressed by simply mandating the use of competitive bidding.

It is very unlikely that you will need to ask 'why?' more than five times. In some cases, you may find you have reached the root cause of the problem after only three or four rounds of questioning. You will know when to stop because the answers will begin to broaden out rather than narrow down.

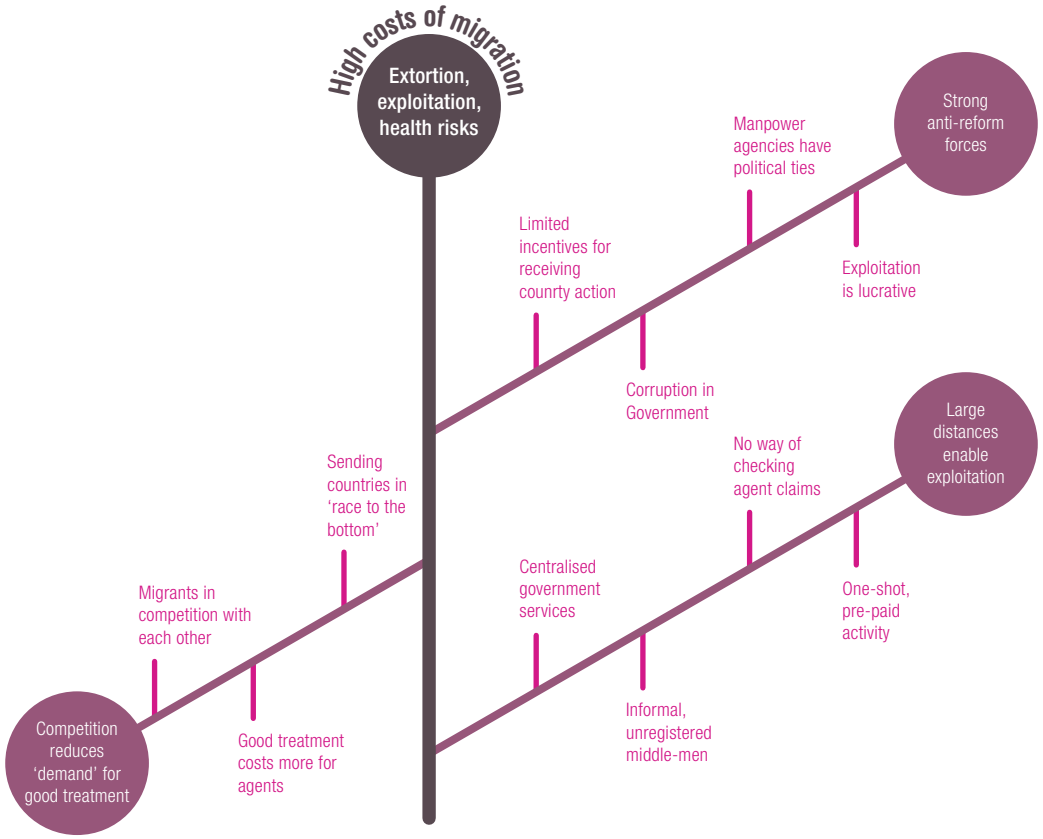

Figure 3: Fishbone diagram of the problems facing Nepali migrant workers

- Begin with the problem as it presents itself.
- Brainstorm all the individual causes you can think of for that problem: this is best done if it has been supported by detailed research and analysis.
- Group these causes and develop the diagram as below (you do not need to limit yourself to three sub-groups, but more than that may prove unworkable).

Figure 3 shows the issues Nepali migrants face as they look for overseas employment. It was developed to help design a programme to reduce the high costs of migration through packages of technical assistance and other types of support. The process began with detailed reviews of the literature on migration, interviews with policy-makers and representatives of migrant workers and wider consultations.

Box 4: Five whys

Every year, 2 million Nepalis travel abroad for permanent and semi-permanent work, leaving through a network of formal labour agencies and informal recruitment agents. A large number of them are extorted – more than 75% pay above the legal maximum fees to secure a job.[3] A large number are also exploited – forced to work inhuman hours in difficult conditions, paid wages considerably lower than promised, being sacked when they fall ill. This exploitation and extortion occurs along the chain of agents and agencies through which migrants travel in Nepal, among middlemen in India and receiving countries and among employers.

Figure 3 shows the component parts of this problem. Policy does play a role but it is not the most important one. Although laws are in place to penalise Nepali manpower agencies proven to be mistreating migrants, very few such agencies have actually been punished. Middlemen are unregistered, which makes it difficult to enforce laws, and the formal labour agencies that oppose reform have political ties. Competition for places reduces the demand from Nepali migrants for better treatment. Since the Gulf is a considerable distance from Nepal and Gulf governments are reluctant to lose a source of cheap labour, there is no real political appetite to reduce the exploitation.

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3. All information from this case study is taken from Jones & Basnett (2013).

Analysing the stakeholders of a problem

Whether you have used the 'five whys' technique or a fishbone diagram, an important step is to map which people/organisations/bodies have an interest in the problem – that is, the stakeholders. Both techniques will probably have shown you that a wider range of stakeholders is involved in the problem than was initially apparent. A stakeholder mapping exercise helps you understand what drives their interest, influence and actions or explains their positions in a programme. It can generate a large amount of useful information about the relationships between different groups of people and how those groups are likely to behave when confronted with the possibility of change.

ROMA uses a simple 2x2 matrix, the 'influence and interest matrix' (Figure 4), to map the stakeholders, in four steps:

1. Clarify the project's overall objective using the 'five whys' or fishbone diagram process.
2. List all the stakeholders you can think of: it is helpful to put each one on a sticky note.
3. Draw the axes of the map, as below, on a large sheet of paper, and place the sticky notes on the map. Begin by working out which stakeholder represents the extreme of each quadrant, and work from there. Your choice of where to place them on the map should be informed by some form of evidence. You could write the evidence on the back of the note. If you are working in distinct regions or countries, it will be helpful to construct different matrices for each one.
4. Go through the sticky notes and work out if you need to break any of them down to identify specific teams or individuals who have different degrees of interest or influence.

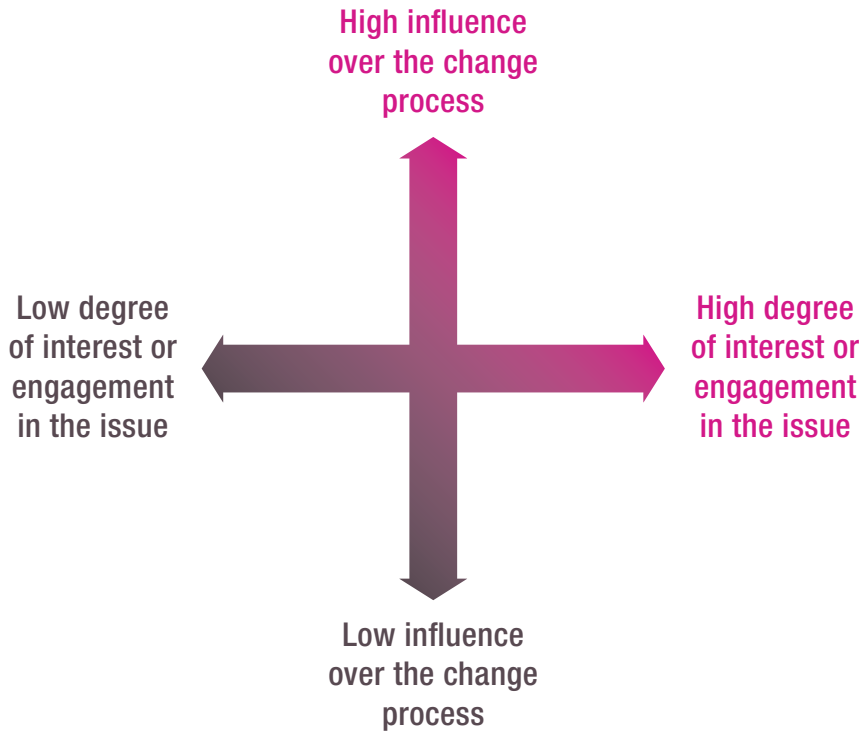

Figure 4: The influence and interest matrix

It is particularly helpful to do this as a group exercise, either with your immediate team or with your primary stakeholders – those you are working closely with to bring about change. Ensure a good variety of people in the group; include those working on communications and M&E, not simply the people implementing the project or programme. The greater the range of people the more detailed your analysis will be, though you need to balance this with considerations of how you will manage the process. If the group is large (say, more than eight people), it may be useful to allocate someone the role of facilitator, to keep the process active.

Discussions about who is influential, why and what forms of interest they show in an issue can uncover important relationships between the stakeholders that you can subsequently use to develop your influencing objective. It will also make it more likely that you will consider the full range of people and organisations that need to be included.

There are three things to remember when constructing an influence and interest matrix:

1. Not all people in an organisation will have the same degree of interest and influence. It may be worth separating them out so you can target the main opinion-formers or blockers of change.
2. It is important to consider all the stakeholders, not just those immediately involved. Separating out your primary and secondary stakeholders using different coloured sticky notes is a helpful way of ensuring you develop the matrix in sufficient detail: the more detail there is, the more likely you will be able to spot common characteristics between groups. This may help you develop your communication strategy (see Chapter 2).
3. It can help to work out what incentives may drive each group to either support or oppose change. It is useful to consider the connections, networks, loyalties, patron–client relations, alliances and points of conflict among and between the different groups. Mapping connections between the stakeholders may also be useful.[4]

Box 5: Using the influence and interest matrix for large or complex projects

For a large multi-country project based at ODI, this matrix was developed in two stages. One stage was done in London by the small project coordinating team, to map the international actors who would be interested in the results of the project, such as donors. The aim was to understand how best to communicate and discuss emerging findings. The other stage was done by the project teams in each country, working with their local collaborators to draw up a map that would help them understand how best to engage with different actors in the policy process in each country.

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4. See, for instance, www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6381.pdf

2. DIAGNOSING COMPLEXITY AND UNCERTAINTY

A final way of diagnosing why policy problems persist is to examine how simple or complex they are and what causes any complexity. It is helpful to do this as different types and degrees of complexity give rise to markedly different solutions and different approaches to achieving these solutions. Complex policy problems require a more iterative approach, to which ROMA is ideally suited.

In practice, there is no firm distinction between simple and complex policy problems – it is more of a spectrum – but it is helpful to clarify some of the distinguishing characteristics:

- **Capacities for change:** where policy issues are simple, decision-making structures are well defined and probably quite hierarchical. This means a decision taken higher up will filter through to the lower levels without much distortion, ensuring everyone is pulling in the same direction. In complex problems, decisions are not fully controlled by one actor but instead influenced by a number of different players with different opinions at different stages in the policy process. The responsibilities, skills and resources needed to make change happen are spread between different agencies or organisations.
- **Goals:** simple policy issues have goals that are widely agreed upon, so there is little conflict or controversy. Where policy issues are complex, different groups will want to pursue divergent goals and will pull in different directions, proposing or even pursuing vastly different courses of action.
- **Change pathways:** simple policy-making processes have regular rhythms, following set routines with foreseeable opportunities for engaging with them. Complex policy-making processes are much less predictable. It is difficult to understand what influences decisions until after the fact, and opportunities for making inputs into those decisions arise quite unexpectedly.

Gauging complexity will constitute one of the main challenges you will face when diagnosing your problem. Each potential aspect of complexity will prompt different approaches to influencing policy and managing your work. Table 1 summarises these approaches, which are described in more detail in the text that follows.

Table 1: diagnosing complexity

Principle for policy-influencing in simple situations	Dimension of complexity	Principle for policy-influencing in complex situations
Centralised capacity	Capacities for change	Distributed capacity
Hierarchical modes of decision-making can be influenced by interventions that are carefully targeted towards key decision spaces or specific organisations.		Influencing interventions should aim to capitalise on distributed capacities, finding ways to link up actors and action that foster more voluntary coordination and collaboration to bring about policy change.
Uncontested goals	Goals	Divergent goals
Influencing policy is a matter of showing new evidence helps achieve goals better than the evidence currently being used.		Influencing interventions must facilitate the joint interpretation of key problems by key actors, and must enable negotiation on and commitment to common goals.
Predictable change pathways	Pathways to change	Uncertain change pathways
Interventions can influence effectively by developing tailored analytical products that fit well into different stages of the policy-making cycle.		Influencing interventions must innovate, foster learning about how change happens and be flexible enough to adapt to emerging signals about what is and is not working.

Jones, 2011.

Distributed capacities

Where power and legitimacy to make and implement policies are distributed through networks of organisations, policy problems become more complex. Networks may be horizontal or vertical, involving both government and non-government organisations. How they interact may mean informal decision-making practices become more important. Failure to understand this may lead to missed opportunities to contribute to or influence change.

Policy is shaped in multiple interconnected spaces

Policies are often shaped by decisions taken at a variety of geographical scales, and within both formal and informal institutions. The 'spaces' where decisions are made will be interdependent, and may have been claimed or created by one or more groups of actors. Addressing complex problems will involve working with several centres of decision-making.

Implementation of policies leaves space for interpretation

No single organisation can deliver change on its own. The real nature of a policy is often strongly shaped during the implementation process, particularly in countries with strong systems of provincial government and within structures where there is strong competition for resources and responsibilities.

Confusion may arise when agencies face multiple directives that are not consistent. They may then choose to implement only a small part of what they are supposed to do. Although systems for monitoring and enforcement can play a key role in determining what outcomes are achieved (particularly around basic service delivery such as clean water provision), it can be difficult to implement these effectively where the issue of who has control and who should do the monitoring is contested.

Broad and diverse groups influence policy and reform processes

A variety of groups will often contest key policy issues, with no single one having sufficient power to impose its preference on others. This gives rise to a complex interaction of interests. Broad coalitions across various loosely connected groups may be needed to garner support for policy change. The importance of informal networks here should not be overlooked.

Knowledge on how to change policy is localised

Much knowledge on how to influence policy change comes from 'learning by doing', particularly when policy processes are characterised by informal institutions and relationships and unstructured decision-making. This means understanding key policy dynamics is likely to be incomplete, even for actors at the top of a hierarchy. The opportunities for change on a sub-issue may be understood only by those continually engaged in working on it.

Box 6: Distributed capacity in the problem of Nepali migrants

Policy on Nepali economic migrants is shaped in multiple interconnected spaces and by overlapping institutions, meaning its implementation leaves considerable space for interpretation:

- Employment agencies have strong political connections through which they can avoid punishment and stop reforms that might result in financial losses. This influence occurs in informal spaces.
- Government and business have strong links: many employment agencies are owned by prominent political figures and a large proportion of the rest have known allegiances to specific parties.
- Bureaucrats tasked with implementing foreign employment policy are effectively subjugated to these interests through patronage systems.

The actors who need to come together to press for harsher punishments are highly distributed and informally linked together:

- Migrants are a very broad group, and the migration process creates further barriers, in part because of separation from social networks. Prospective migrants compete with each other for a limited number of jobs; absence from the country and inability to vote further limit their political power.
- A number of civil society actors work on migration, but there is currently no single strategic coalition pressing for change. There is a relatively strong academic presence on the issue; some established senior 'leaders' have the ear of high-level politicians and have carried out crucial research.
- The media and the general public have at times played a role in migration policy. Reporting on mistreatment and deaths abroad has occasionally led to a groundswell of public opinion against manpower agencies. However, this has not resulted in a broad coalition for change: the Nepali media itself often relies on foreign journalism for the reporting of incidents in migrant-receiving countries.
- The judiciary and the legal system have the power to help exploited migrants get compensation from manpower agencies, but there is insufficient legal aid in general, and for migrants specifically.
- Development agencies in Nepal do not have a strong focus on migration and are not well coordinated on the issue.

Actors outside the direct sphere of influence nonetheless play a major role in sustaining the problem, thus hampering reform efforts:

- Demand for cheap labour (such as for workers from agencies without paying commission) in receiving companies in the Gulf and elsewhere is high.
- Governments in receiving countries show little interest in protecting migrant workers' rights. Many are not signatories to international conventions on worker and migrant rights. International organisations working on migrant issues have little influence.

Divergent goals

Where different stakeholders have different goals, policy problems become more complex. For example, with collective action issues, it is highly unlikely success will be achieved by imposing the goals of one group on the others.

Narratives, values and knowledge compete

Underpinning divergent goals are typically quite different perspectives about exactly what the problem is, what the underlying factors are and how to solve it. The knowledge, beliefs and perspectives related to these are often major drivers behind the logic of people's decisions.

Policy change for complex issues requires reconciling divergent interests and goals

As different groups aim to advance their own interests, processes of policy change can function like a large-scale negotiation. This can result in allies of convenience: organisations work with other actors whose values may not necessarily be the same as theirs. In some cases, they may not share the same long-term goals but bond together to secure short-term change. In others, they have a common long-term interest but different short-term goals.

Implementation may involve conflicting (or unclear) mandates

Many policy issues are shared between several actors. This means that, for policy change to happen, stakeholders have to reconcile their different aims, mandates, approaches and resource needs. There may also be conflicts between medium- and long-term goals, particularly where top-line project goals are not realistically achievable within the prescribed timeframe and programmes needed to target intermediate changes.

Box 7: Divergent goals in the problem of Nepali migrants

Many stakeholders agree openly on the need to reduce the exploitation of migrants and punish those responsible. However, the underlying situation is more complex.

For some migrants, the goal of safety seems to come second to that of paid employment. Exploitation is to some extent naturalised: it is seen as an integral part of life for large sections of the male population.

Donors and international agencies that are explicitly or implicitly opposed to the mistreatment of migrants also face complications. Working to help labour migrants is a political risk as it promotes the exodus of Nepali workers: the International Labour Organization is officially opposed to labour migration.

Manpower agencies pursue exploitative practices to secure profits. In an industry where many players are cutting corners by paying less, taking a stand would make a single agency uncompetitive. Manpower agencies note that they are middlemen facing competition in destination countries and blame employers there for exploitation.

Political parties react to popular sentiment, and public outcry has resulted in high-profile policy announcements. However, the prevailing uncertainty and interim nature of politics in Nepal have encouraged parties to seek multiple sources of funding. Meanwhile, as manpower agencies provide one of the only booming and steady industries in Nepal, some see taking a stand on migrant protection as politically risky. Most political parties in Nepal place the blame for abuse on receiving countries.

Civil servants in Nepal acknowledge the problem, but their career progression is often driven by the need to maintain good political connections and to be loyal to patronage networks.

Uncertain change pathways

Where problems are complex, change is unpredictable. Making detailed, long-term and inflexible plans to influence policy will not work, as it is hard to understand in advance what the key drivers may be or how they will operate. Unforeseen windows for influence may be missed. As Chapter 2 shows, the emphasis needs to be on incremental change, monitoring and learning, with the flexibility to translate this into improved processes for influencing policy.

Box 8: Uncertain pathways of change in the problem of Nepali migrants

It is hard to predict when good opportunities will arise to increase the penalties for malpractice by manpower agencies. For example, how strong pressure for action is, and how long it lasts, depends on the severity of the incident reported, making it difficult to predict.

If governments resort to 'knee-jerk' models of policy-making, with quick-win actions, populist measures and/or soothing rhetoric, policy is often not well thought-through and may be self-defeating.

Occasionally, political parties have acted on migrant exploitation without waiting for another horrific incident, even when this has come at political cost with minimal gain. Such possibilities are hampered by the inherent instability of Nepali governments. Given the opaque nature of policy-making on labour migration, it is impossible to predict which of many possible entry points are the most promising.

Methods of influencing policy are therefore highly context-, issue- and timing-dependent.

Where knee-jerk policy is made, civil society figures with political connections may provide advice on likely policies, though often behind closed doors. Given the fragmented nature of Nepali politics, it is not easy to predict which connections (if any) will pay off.

Because of Nepal's political instability, consistent implementation of sanctions against labour agencies is unlikely. Instead, change will probably only come through a 'tipping point' of horror stories, a critical mass of support or another crisis narrative.

3. SYSTEMIC FACTORS: THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

A final step helps you consider the wider political and institutional environment, how it affects the persistence of a particular problem and where reform is most likely to come from. Understanding political context is a key part of understanding how knowledge, policy and power relations interact with each other and what this means for how research-based evidence is taken up and used. Asking five questions helps you develop this contextual analysis:

1 **Which branch of government holds the key to change?**
In most democracies, government is split into three parts: parliament, the civil service and the judiciary. This separation is intended to provide a series of checks and balances, as all three are involved in policy-making, albeit to different extents. Discussing the relationships between all three branches can help in uncovering whether these checks and balances work at all, and where the real blockages lie.

2 **Where and how does political debate occur?**
If political debate happens out in the open, there will be few blockages and it may be most helpful to actively engage in it. Where debate happens behind closed doors, or where there are strong vested interests involved, it will be difficult to engage, and you will need to consider other groups through which you could work to influence policy. Referring back to your influence and interest matrix will help you identify who those might be.

3 **What role do informal politics play?**
Informal politics, whether personality-, patronage- or group-based, can play an important role in policy-making. Where informal politics are strong, they can override formal policy-making procedures and block change from happening.

4 **Is there really capacity to make change happen?**
Many developing country governments have limited capacity to make change happen. Civil servants may be ineffective, political parties may have such a tenuous hold on power that they find it hard to implement substantive change or voting patterns may be so entrenched that change becomes unlikely – particularly if the change is designed to benefit marginalised groups who are less likely to vote.

5 How do external forces influence change?
Donor relationships, international dialogues and processes can have a strong influence on policy-making processes.

4. SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have discussed:

- how to define a problem, using diagnostic tools such as the 'five whys' for a first approximation of the problem and a fishbone diagram for more detailed diagnosis;
- how to analyse stakeholders of a problem, using an interest and influence matrix for mapping where different interests and influences lie;
- how to diagnose and respond to complexity, learning how to differentiate between centralised and distributed capacity, agreed and divergent goals and certain and uncertain change pathways; and,
- finally, how to assess wider systemic factors, through the use of five questions.

It will be important to document this analysis: keeping the maps and diagrams you have produced, the analysis you have done and the conclusions you have drawn from all of this. Some of the analysis may be in the form of a narrative document (such as in Boxes 6-8) to the level of detail you require. Others, such as key conclusions and actions from the workshops, may take the form of bullet pointed action lists that set out what you intend to do and by when. Not only will you need to refer to all your documents again, but also it can be helpful to share your analysis with others as you begin to engage with them.