

Objectives:

- 🕒 Help reduce the scope of campaigns in order to focus efforts on where change can really be achieved.
- 🕒 Consider the possible consequences of working on one part of a problem rather than others.

Before you start

Some activist organisations find the idea of 'cutting the issue' a helpful way to translate a daunting and complex problem into one or more 'bite-sized' issues where they can realistically consider making a difference. 'Cutting' or reducing the scope of a problem in several ways through creative brainstorming processes can help your group consider the relative merits of different approaches you might take. For instance, you can cut an issue to maximise its immediacy in the community, guard your campaign against claims of extremism or appeal to different allies and constituents.

Here's how community organisers [Dave Beckwith and Christina Lopez](#) (1997) describe issues and how to pick one that you can organise around:

"Typically, there is a tangled web of problems - complaints, irritations, bad situations, oppressions, difficulties, injustices, crises, messes. An issue is a problem that the community can be organized around. I learned a formula to describe this distinction from Stan Holt, Director of People Acting through Community Effort, in Providence, RI in 1971, when he gave me and another raw recruit our 6 hours of basic training before he sent us out door to door. He used the initials I S R on the chalkboard in the dingy little office at Broad and Public (I thought it was a pretty apt address for a community group - and I'm NOT making it up!). Immediate, specific and realizable. (I never could spell that last one) An organizer 'cuts' an issue - interprets or massages perceptions or manipulates situations until they fit these criteria as closely as possible. The thought process was to become automatic after a dozen years.

"**Immediate**, he said, in terms of either the benefit folks would get from victory or, preferably, the harm they would suffer from inaction. 'The bulldozers are coming and you'll be out on the street tomorrow' is far better than 'would you like to be part of a community planning process'.

"**Specific** refers to both the problem and its solution. Vacant buildings are a problem. That building that we want torn down by the end of the month is an issue.

"**[Winnable]** is the toughest of all. It's easy to describe the extreme, the global problem beyond the reach of a Block Club or a neighborhood organization. That's not a good issue, especially not in the early stages. Most effective community

organizations can point to victories that any sane person would say were far beyond their reach, though. Who would have thought that a handful of neighborhood folks concerned about their children would get the government to buy their homes and relocate their families, putting Love Canal into the language as a symbol of environmental disaster in the process. Who would have said that East Toledo could get agreement and construction on a \$10 million dollar road project that would open up employment possibilities for their neighborhood, and only five years from concept to construction? It remains true, though, that calculating the odds on winning is an important first step.”

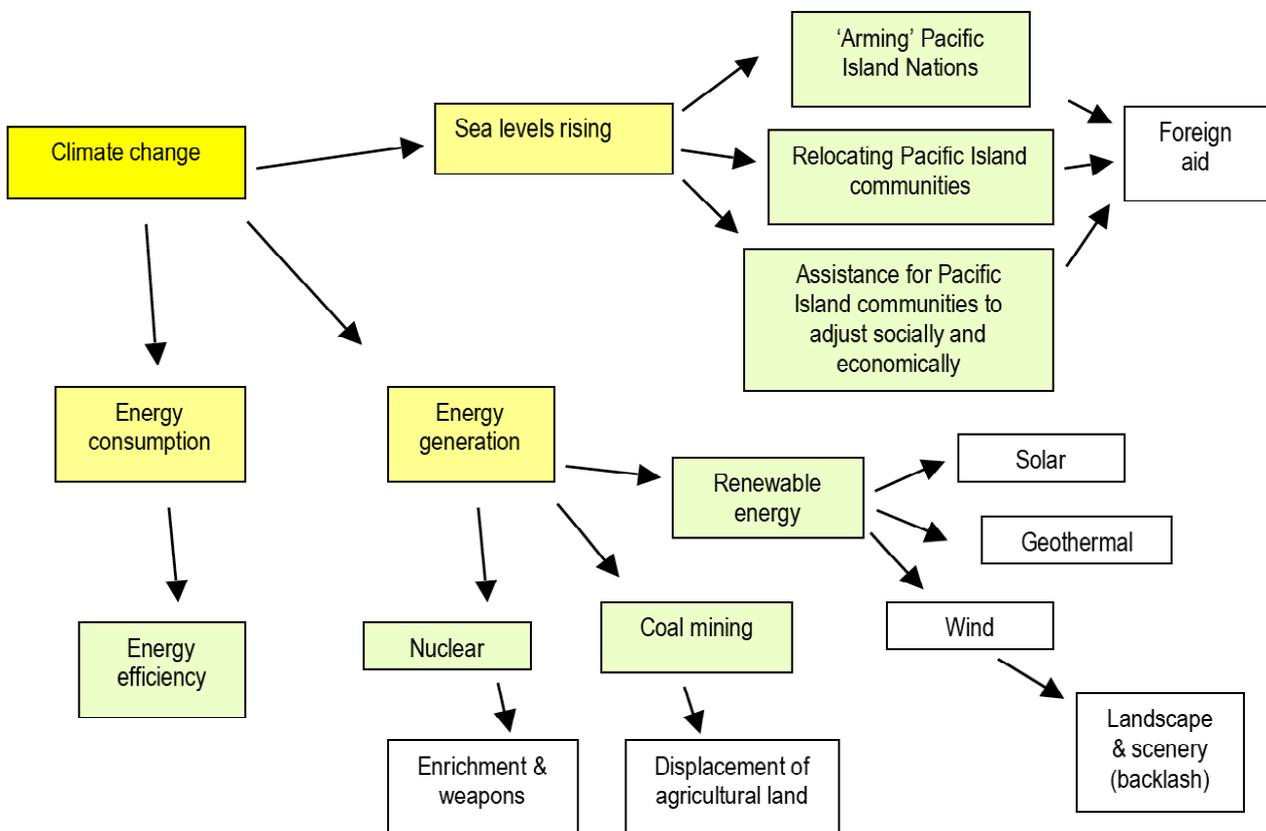
Remember “Cutting the Issue” is different from analysing a problem although it is a useful thing to do after developing an analysis.

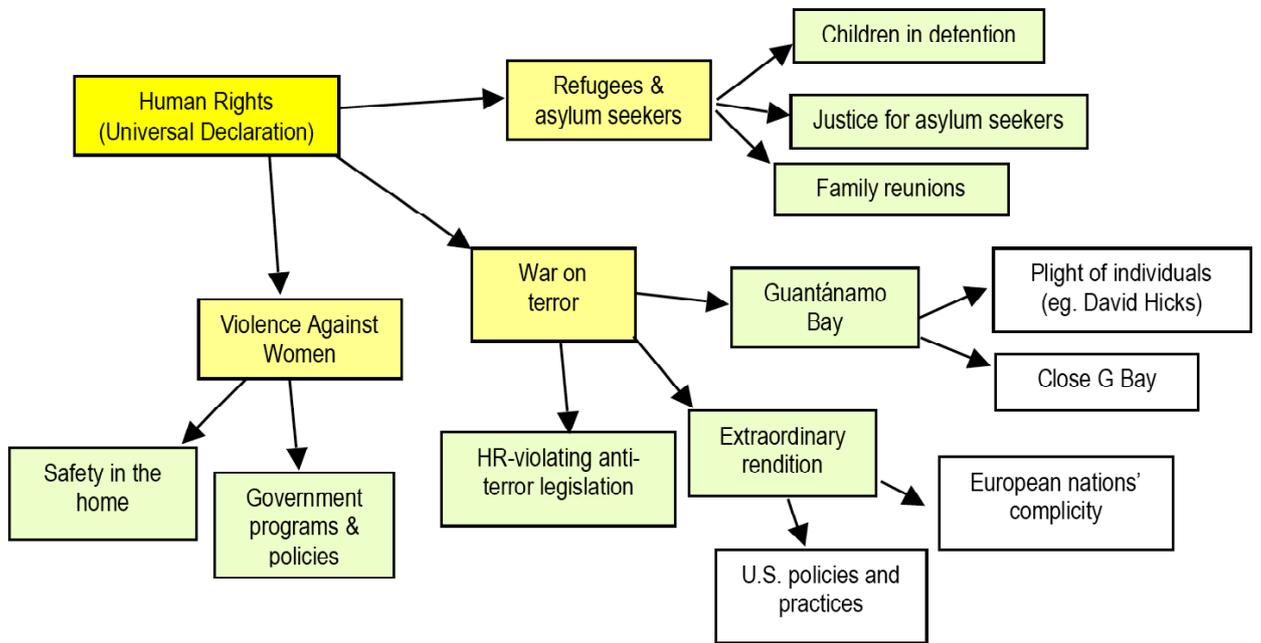
Time:

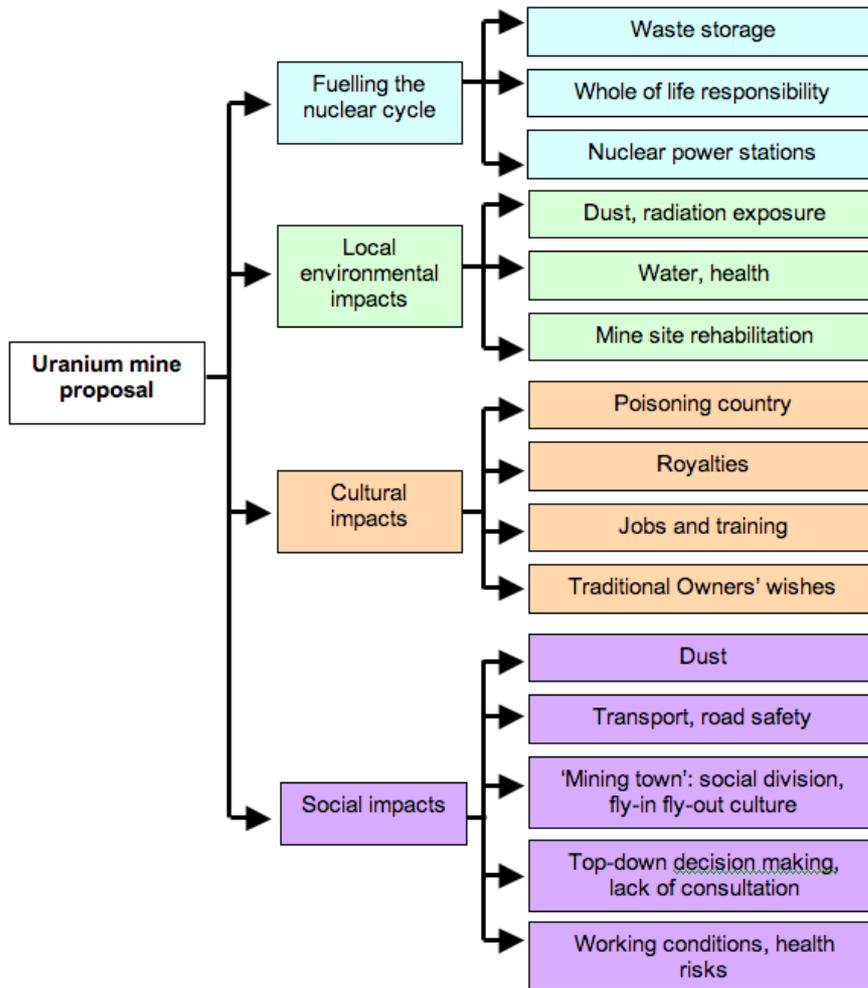
40 minutes (although this exercise can easily take a lot longer depending on how experienced the group is and the challenges of what they are working on).

How it’s done

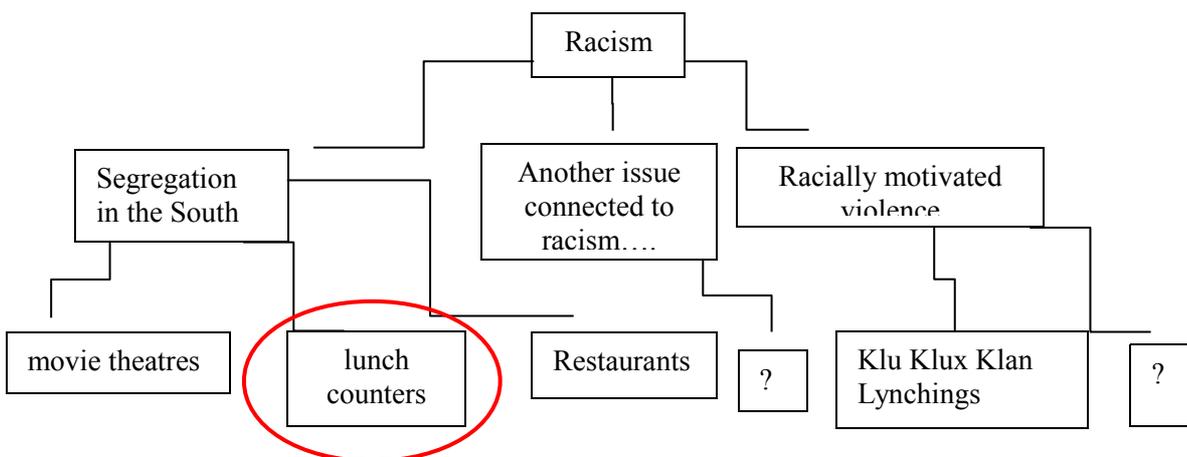
1. Think of a significant social or environmental problem you’d like to address.
2. Consider how to cut this bigger problem into smaller issues that have traction with (or appeal to) different targets, community groups and other audiences. What are some ways that people interpret, respond to or campaign around the problem. This is illustrated in the following diagrams. In the first, we’ve cut the problem of climate change. In the second, we attempt various ways to cut the problem of human rights violations.







Here's a simplified version of how Rev. James Lawson cut the issue of racism in Nashville, Tennessee in the 1960s.



Racism in the U.S was made up of a complex inter-relationship of issues but Lawson decided to focus his efforts on one aspect of the racism at that time, segregated lunch counters. Segregation was not the only manifestation of racism in the U.S South at that time and lunch counters were not the only amenities that were segregated. Lawson picked this issue because it was specific, immediate and

winnable. Nashville's students went on to win the campaign to desegregate lunch counters then turned their attention to other campaigns that made up the U.S Civil Rights struggle.

It can be really helpful to watch the Nashville segment of the film "A Force More Powerful" prior to cutting the issues or even at this point in the exercise and then support the participants to not only cut the issue of racism but also notice how cutting the issue and working on a smaller part of the problem can help movements build power by winning a smaller campaigns. This gives them strength to win bigger battles. If you do watch then debrief the video that will take an additional 1 hour.

3. As you support participants to cut the issues you might need to experiment with the different issues you suggest to create a logic that works for you and your group. Here's where post-it notes come in handy. Can you cluster things?
4. (Optional) Perhaps you could then try a 'forcefield analysis' exercise (another exercise on www.thechangeagency.org) to assess the relative strengths of some of these issues. Will some approaches to cutting the issue mobilise your constituency more effectively, counteract some of the forces that oppose the changes you're working on, create alliances with powerful stakeholders who might not otherwise align with your campaign.

The climate change example was created during our campaign strategy workshops in 2006. It's far from complete, but illustrates how the vexing problem of climate change might be cut into different issues. Each issue implies a different approach, including corporate campaigning, community organising and solutions based work.

When we shared a draft of this exercise with a group campaigning around climate change, their first response was, 'Oh, no! Now we need to work three times as hard to tackle all those different issues!' This is absolutely not the point of the exercise! On the contrary, the suggestion here is that to make a difference and work within your sphere of influence (and what's actually possible), you need to select a particular way of cutting the issue that takes you in a direction that will best use your resources and strengths, gain traction with the media and community, and create an impact that will flow on to bigger changes. Unfortunately there is no sure way to support facilitators how to do this. I suggest choosing an issue to cut that you and hopefully a number of other people in the room are familiar with.

The uranium mine example was developed with environmental campaigners in Alice Springs during 2009. Once we'd mapped out these many ways their problem might be 'cut', we asked small groups to consider which issue was most immediate, specific and realisable (winnable) in their community. Working independently, each three small groups reached the same conclusion. Community members are universally concerned about dust. The township experiences intense dust storms. The prospect of being clothed with dust that came from a uranium mine, and children breathing it was considered the best way to mobilise the community and generate support for the campaign.

Source:

James Whelan, Sam La Rocca and Jason MacLeod, the Change Agency,
<http://www.thechangeagency.org>

These works are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License.

You are free to copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work under these conditions: attribution to the Change Agency and www.thechangeagency.org, and the original author/publisher (listed under 'Source'); only using this work for non-commercial purposes; share alike (if you alter, transform, or build upon this work, distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one).