

ANALYZING SOCIAL ISSUES: Some Simple Techniques

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANALYSIS?

Social analysis simply means investigating social phenomena in a systematic and analytical way.

It involves going beyond the anecdotal or descriptive to explore causes and consequences. We move from describing what is happening to exploring why it is happening.

Taking time for analysis stops us from making purely emotional responses or planning action without adequate information or understanding. Our actions are likely to be more effective if we have examined why an issue or situation exists, the different factors involved and the relationships between them, and what supports the injustice or works against positive change.

In order to plan a Christian response we will also want to reflect theologically on the information provided by our analysis. We will look for insight into the meaning of these things in the light of the Gospel and Church teaching, in order to make a Christian response.

STRUCTURES, PROCESSES & INSTITUTIONS

We do not live as isolated individuals but rather within a web of relationships. We join with others in organized and regular patterns of behaviour and this helps us to better meet our needs, achieve our potential, and pursue the common good.

Every society has structures, processes and institutions which both organise and influence the way in which people and groups interact within the society, and how the society interacts with other societies.

We can group such factors into categories including:

- **economic** (how resources are organised);
- **social** (how relationships between different groups in society function);
- **political** (how power and decision-making are organised); and
- **cultural** (how a society makes meaning).

These structures, institutions and patterns of behaviour may be biased in favour of some groups while neglecting the needs of others. They may promote social justice, or work against it. Social analysis examines how our society is structured and how its institutions are functioning.

Our analysis might focus on one category or set of factors, for example an economic analysis, or a gender analysis (gender structures are part of the category of social structures), or our analysis might range across all relevant structures.

Social justice matters are often complex, involving many different factors belonging to different categories. A range of strategies may be needed to address the different factors involved and to take into account the interaction between them. Analysis helps us to find entry points for action and to develop strategies.

AVOIDING ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

We don't have to be professional social researchers to analyze what is happening in our society.

Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of the data, or not taking any action because we don't feel that we know enough, we can use simple techniques to work with what we do know.

As we continue to reflect and act, we will gather more experience and knowledge enabling us to deepen, refine or rethink our action responses.

SOME SIMPLE TECHNIQUES

In these pages you will find some simple techniques that can be used to undertake social analysis in a school or parish environment. They propose a variety of questions that help us to examine our society.

The questions could be provided to participants ahead of time to allow them to gather data, or used as a focus for brainstorming or group discussion.

WEB CHART ANALYSIS OF AN ISSUE

1. Write the issue in the middle of the chart.
2. Brainstorm all the consequences of the issue that you can think of and write them on the chart.
3. Brainstorm second, third or fourth level relations (e.g. consequences of consequences etc) and write these on the chart too.
4. Draw linkages between the consequences.
5. Repeat the process charting and linking the causes of the issue.

Some variations:

- Use different colours to indicate different categories of causes or consequences e.g. red for political factors; blue for social factors; yellow for cultural factors; green for economic factors.
- Draw different shapes around each cause or consequence to indicate the level at which they operate e.g. triangles for local factors; squares for national factors; circles for international factors.
- Note both causes and consequences on the same chart using different colours.

A SIMPLE ISSUE ANALYSIS

1. What is the issue or problem?
2. Gather as many relevant facts as possible. You can start by brainstorming or by doing some research prior to your gathering.
3. Classify the available facts about the issue according to the following categories: historical; political; economic; social; cultural.
4. Identify links between factors.
5. Identify entry points for action or points of leverage accessible to your group.

A RIGHTS BASED APPROACH TO A SITUATION

1. What human rights are involved in this situation?
2. What is the current situation in relation to each of these rights?
3. Who are the relevant duty bearers?
4. What actions are needed in the long and short terms to respect, protect, and fulfill these rights?
5. What indicators might help us to know if we are heading in the right direction, or if matters are getting worse?

A NOTE ON SOCIAL SIN & RESPONSIBILITY

Social structures, processes and institutions can constrain our action, but they cannot remove our freedom and responsibility. We cannot simply blame ‘the system’ for our bad behaviour or rely on any ‘system’ to ensure social justice. In the end it is people who are responsible for social structures:

“... cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world, and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals.

A situation - or likewise an institution, a structure, a society itself – is not in itself the subject of moral acts...”

John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, n 16

Our challenge is to disentangle ourselves from structures of sin and to transform them into structures that support and encourage social justice.

SITUATION ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. Who are the winners and losers in this situation?
2. Who makes the decisions?
3. How can decision-makers be held accountable?
4. Who can influence or constrain the decision-makers? How?
5. What is happening to:
 - a. The winners?
 - b. The losers?
 - c. Our society?
 - d. The earth?
6. What values are at stake?
7. Which values are being affirmed in this situation, and which are being denied?
8. Who has moral responsibility in this situation?
9. What policies are needed to ensure that everyone's basic needs are met?
10. Are the needs/rights of different groups in conflict?
11. What do those who suffer from this situation want to see happen?

A BASIC GENDER ANALYSIS

1. How is the issue or situation experienced by women and girls, and by men and boys?
2. How are decisions being made and who is involved?
3. Whose interests are given the greatest weight?
4. What needs to change in order to achieve gender equality, and what are the barriers to such change?

REFERENCES

- Catholic Commission for Justice & Peace, *Changing ... You & I & Us*, CCJP, Sydney, 1985.
- Human Rights Council of Australia, *Rights Based Approach to Development*, see <http://www.hrca.org.au/activities.htm>
- John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 1984.