

PROBLEM TREE TEMPLATE

Operational Tool for Module 2 – Ideas & Opportunities

*Entrepreneurial thinking begins not with a business idea, but with the **ability to observe, question, and understand the world around us.***

Whether in the workplace, the classroom, or the community, meaningful innovation starts when we ask:

- “What is the real problem here?”
- “Why does this happen?”
- “What could we do to improve it?”

The Problem Tree Template is a structured yet flexible tool designed to guide students and teachers in vocational education and training to **critically analyse a local or societal problem, break it down into its root causes, explore its visible effects, and begin imagining early-stage solution ideas.** It encourages learners to develop a sense of initiative, ethical awareness, and opportunity recognition—all key pillars of the Ideas & Opportunities area of the EntreComp framework.

This tool does not require prior experience in entrepreneurship. Rather, it builds the foundation for **active, informed, and responsible learners**, capable of seeing themselves as agents of change within their own context—whether that be a technical field, a local neighbourhood, a classroom, or a workplace.

It can be used:

- As a standalone learning activity
- As a starting point for collaborative projects
- As a scaffold to develop proposals (especially in connection with Module 4’s “Theory of Change” tool)

The Problem Tree invites learners to explore real problems—those they feel, live, and care about—and to map them visually and conceptually in a way that leads toward purposeful action.



RECOMMENDED STEPS for TEACHERS

1. Preparation

1. Explain the purpose of the tool: “We are going to map a real problem that we observe in our community or profession. The goal is not to fix everything, but to understand the problem deeply and think about how to act on it.”
2. Provide printed or digital versions of the template.

2. Problem selection

1. Ask learners to think about challenges they observe in their environment—workplace, school, city, online spaces.
2. Guide them toward **specific, observable issues**, rather than abstract ones (e.g., “youth unemployment in our town” is better than “inequality”).

3. Root cause exploration

1. Encourage students to explore causes they **don’t immediately see**.
2. Use guiding questions like:
 - “What factors keep this problem going?”
 - “Who benefits from the problem staying the way it is?”

4. Mapping effects

1. Help students distinguish between **short-term symptoms** and **long-term impacts**.
2. Use real-life examples to illustrate ripple effects.

5. Ideation phase

1. Frame this as an **early-stage brainstorming step**, not a final solution.
2. Ask: “What’s something small, local, and meaningful you could do that would begin to shift this issue?”

6. Debrief

1. Invite groups to present their trees.
2. Encourage reflection on **what surprised them, what they discovered, or how their thinking shifted**.

7. Reflective prompts for deeper learning

1. Engage learners to reflect on the following:
 - *Was the problem you identified more complex than you thought at first?*
 - *Which root causes were hardest to identify?*
 - *If you had to act on just one part of this tree, where would you start?*



PROBLEM TREE TEMPLATE – *Version for learners*

Section 1: THE TRUNK

What is the main problem?

Clearly describe the specific issue that concerns you in your school, workplace, or community.

- **Problem title**

...

- **Brief problem description:**

...

- **Who is affected by this problem?**

...

- **Where does the problem occur? (Context / setting)**

...

- **Why is this an important issue to address?**

...



Section 2: THE ROOTS

What are the underlying causes of this problem?

Explore the deeper reasons why this issue exists. Think about historical, economic, institutional, and cultural causes—not just the surface-level symptoms.

Root cause	Explanation	Evidences of clues
1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.
...
<i>Add as many as you want</i>		

Pro tip: Try using the “5 Whys” technique: keep asking “Why?” until you reach deeper causes.

Section 3: THE BRANCHES

What are the visible effects or consequences?

Identify the direct and indirect impacts this problem has on people, systems, or the environment.

Short-term effects (symptoms, immediate problems):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Add as many as you want

Long-term effects (lasting damage, consequences over time):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Add as many as you want

Are these effects connected in a cycle?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, explain: _____



SECTION 4: THE SEEDLINGS

What are some early solution ideas?

Don't try to fix everything—start small. Think of what could raise awareness, make conditions better, or create dialogue.

Idea 1 (quick win):

Idea 2 (medium-term effort):

Idea 3 (ambitious or long-term change):

Who could help you develop this idea?

Which values matter most in your solution? (Tick all that apply)

- Inclusion
- Sustainability
- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Efficiency
- Responsibility
- Other: _____



OPTIONAL: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What did you learn by breaking down the problem this way?

- Which part of the tree was most difficult?

- Do you feel differently about the problem now? Why?

- Would you be interested in developing one of your solution ideas into a real project?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe



PROBLEM TREE TEMPLATE – Version for teachers

For VET Teachers and Trainers the key purpose is to help learners critically explore a real-world challenge and develop early-stage solution thinking, aligned with the Ideas & Opportunities area of the EntreComp Framework. This facilitation guide supports you in guiding learners through the four zones of the Problem Tree Template. It offers:

- Pedagogical purpose of each section
- Suggested discussion points and prompts
- Key focus areas to look for in student responses
- Tips to deepen entrepreneurial and systems thinking

THE TRUNK – Learners define the core problem and its context

Learning objectives	Facilitation guidelines	What to look for...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express a challenge clearly and concretely • Identify who is affected, where, and why it matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help learners narrow down vague problems • Use WH-questions to guide precision 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Specificity (problem is concrete and observable) 2. Relevance to the learners' environment 3. Sensitivity to those affected (stakeholders named)

THE ROOTS – Learners investigate structural and systemic causes

Learning objectives	Facilitation guidelines	What to look for...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think beyond the surface and explore root causes • Link social, economic, cultural or institutional contributors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the “5 Whys” technique to move past symptoms. • Encourage research and dialogue: what do others say about this problem? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Layers of causality (not just obvious or immediate causes) 2. Cause–effect chains that make sense 3. Ability to explain “how” and “why” a root cause leads to the problem

THE BRANCHES – Learners analyse the impact and consequences

Learning objectives	Facilitation guidelines	What to look for...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand both immediate and long-term effects • Recognise who or what is harmed, and in what way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage learners to distinguish between short- and long-term effects • Ask: “What happens next if this problem continues?” 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Logical connections between the problem and its effects 2. Range of perspectives (e.g., workers, students, businesses, nature) 3. Awareness of feedback loops or cycles

THE SEEDLINGS – Learners begin ideating possible actions

Learning objectives	Facilitation guidelines	What to look for...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorm potential interventions, no matter how small • Reflect on who could be involved and what values matter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasise that these are seed ideas, not final plans • Suggest different “levels” of action: what could be done tomorrow vs. in 6 months 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feasibility (ideas don't have to be perfect, but should be plausible) 2. Early signs of ethical and sustainable thinking 3. Consideration of collaboration and values

INTEGRATION AND REFLECTIONS

Wrap up tips	Class reflection questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host a short gallery walk: have each team post their tree and briefly present it • Discuss similarities/differences in root causes or ideas • Ask learners to vote on the most urgent, most original, or most actionable tree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you learn about this problem that you hadn't thought of before? • Which part of the tree was most difficult to complete, and why? • How could we use this tool in our future projects or discussions?

