

Consider the Context of your problem

The issue you have been studying doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's affected by a wide variety of factors that contribute to the circumstances surrounding the issue. Think of your issue as something that lives in a pre-existing framework of laws, policies, actions, and systems of oppression. This framework is the context in which your issue exists, and it can't be ignored. No effort to create a more equitable society will be successful without taking the context into consideration. In this step, you'll examine your issue's context and consider the unique factors that affect it.

Laws & Regulations

Almost any issue you can think of is affected by laws. Maybe you came across some references to this while you were doing your research. (If not, make a note right now to look it up.) Only a legislative body can pass laws, and there are legislative bodies at all levels of government—the state legislature, the county board of supervisors, the city council and even neighborhood councils. Laws at the state level are called statutes, while laws at the county and local levels are usually called ordinances. Sometimes a legislative body gives rulemaking authority to another part of government. For example, the county board may give the county facilities department the authority to make additional rules for a popular local park. The additional rules made by a department are usually called regulations.

Your issue may be affected by laws and regulations at several levels of government. Even an issue that seems purely local on the surface could be governed by rules at the state or federal level. It's critical to find out about this because laws and regulations can affect your options for taking action. For example, if your issue is migrating geese making a huge mess at the park, you'll want to know it's against federal law to transport migratory birds before you launch your "Operation Move-a-Goose" program. If your issue is community togetherness, and you're planning a weekly "Feed the Ducks Frenzy," better check local ordinances and regulations to see if feeding ducks at the park is prohibited.

Government Policies

If government agencies are involved in your issue in any way, you'll want to know the agency's policies regarding the issue. These are the principles that guide government officials when making decisions or passing laws. Government policies affect the kinds of actions the government takes to address an issue and the kinds of efforts that the government will support. If you're thinking about pushing for some kind of change in the way government is addressing your issue, your effort might be a lost cause if it's not consistent with government policy. Of course, you might decide that a particular government policy is the issue. In that case, your plan might be to change the government's policy.

Often, government agencies will explain their approach to an issue or their reasoning for taking certain actions. This can help you figure out what their policies are even if they don't have an "Our Policies" page on their website (which they probably won't). You can also look for an agency's goals and then look at the steps they're taking to achieve those goals. What do those steps suggest about the agency's policies about your issue?

Get at the Roots

Every issue has a cause. Some are simple to figure out: Your neighborhood streets flood every time it rains because the county government hasn't maintained the drainage system. Others aren't so easy. Many issues have a complex web of root causes that can seem impossible to fully identify, let alone solve. But the root causes of your issue are the ultimate factors that drive the issue and keep it going. Based on what you've learned, you should be able to do some thoughtful analysis of your issue's root causes. What's really standing in the way of something better? As you think about this, also consider what cycles or systems of oppression keep the problem going. For example, people who are homeless often are also out of work. In order to find a place to live, they need money. But in order to get a job, they need a permanent address. That's a well-known cycle that contributes to chronic homelessness. Are there cycles that keep your issue from being permanently resolved?

Attitude Adjustment

People's attitudes are also part of the context in which an issue exists. The reason most issues are issues in the first place is because people have feelings and opinions about the situation—even if it's just a small group of people in a local area. People's attitudes can help or hurt your cause, so it's important to be aware of any strong prevailing attitudes about your issue. For example, someone determined to improve public transportation in a city where most people drive their own cars might face an uphill battle. That doesn't necessarily mean opposition. It could just mean lack of interest, which translates into lack of support, which can mean not much progress being made on that issue. But if that's the case with your issue, don't give up just yet: Sometimes, all it takes is someone to call people's attention to the issue and get them interested. That person can be you.

The Almighty Dollar

Let's not be naive. With most issues, money is part of the context. Maybe it's because the cost of solving the issue is astronomical. Maybe it's because key players stand to lose or gain money depending on how the issue is handled. Never let the fear of money and its influence stop you from working for what you believe is right—just pay attention

to where dollars and cents might factor in. Be aware about how the money can help or hurt your cause.

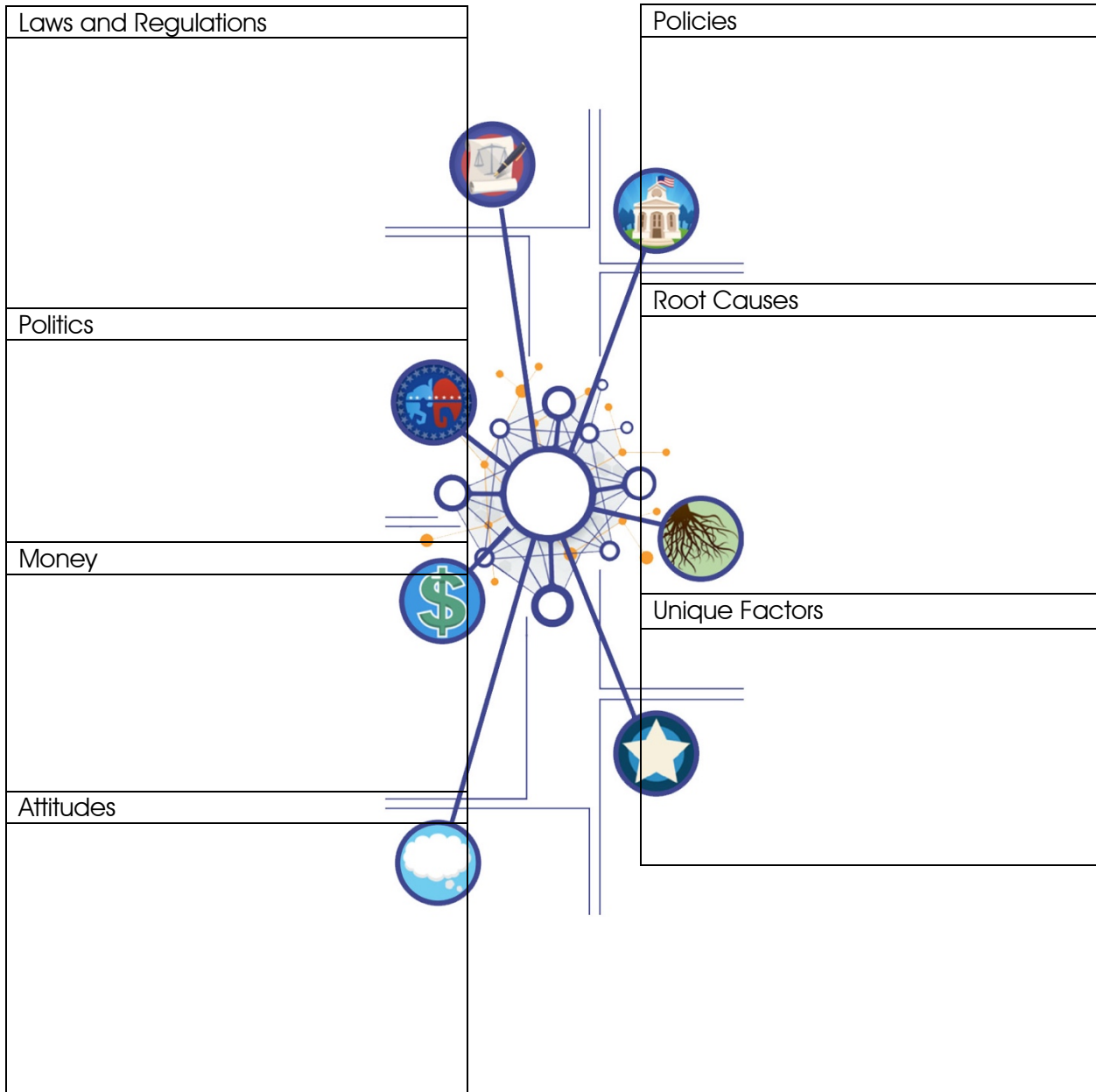
Political Climate

There's no escaping politics, and your issue might be standing right in its path. Not every issue is political, but many are. The politics in your local area or in the nation as a whole can affect how much traction your issue gets. Just like money, don't let politics stop you. Instead, use your understanding of the political climate to help you strategize.

Unique Factors

Finally, there are always circumstances that give an issue its own unique context. These could be related to just about anything—geography, weather, people's personalities, particular industries involved, the sensitive nature of the issue, a freak swarm of insects... You'll only know by learning about the situation.

Context Web



Context Analysis Template

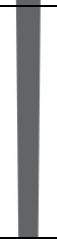
Find sets of related factors on your Context Web, where each set includes factors from two or more categories. For each set, explain how the factors could affect each other.

Factors:	How Could the affect each other:
Set 2	
Factors:	How Could the affect each other:
Set 3	
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Set 4	
Factors:	How Could the affect each other:

Context Analysis Template Part 2

Susceptibility to Change. List 7 factors from your Context Web next to the scale where you think they most belong. For each one, explain your susceptibility rating.

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Work Around Obstacles. Based on your analysis of your Context Web, what seems like the biggest obstacle to success on your issue?

Why?

Now, think of three ways you could still move the needle despite this obstacle:

1.

2.

3.