Workshop: Exploring the Root Causes

1h20 – 2 hours
minimum 6 – 8 participants

AIMS OF THE INTRODUCTORY MODULES

Explore and compare the root causes of inequality and environmental destruction in order to better understand the dynamics underlying our current social organisation.

SESSION SUMMARY

This is an interactive exercise to explore the root causes of inequality and environmental destruction. When tackling problems, it is often easier to focus on symptoms than on the root causes of these problems. This is true for small problems like a leaky tap, as well as big ones. Tackling the root causes of problems requires questioning the very nature of a system, an organisation, our patterns of behaviour, and our values. It is challenging; and complex.

Its purpose is to encourage analytical thinking and to provide an opportunity to break down complex ideas into simpler elements. If working in complexity means tackling multiple issues from multiple perspectives, this can seem like an overwhelming and impossible task.

It is therefore helpful to practise ways of thinking that encourage us to analyse issues in depth. We are going to do that in an exercise that will help us to look at the deeper levels of social unease and inequality that lie behind our current problems. This exercise will compel us to look at what’s wrong and why we think things are wrong. Breaking ideas down into their components will hopefully help participants to identify common themes and issues across multiple domains, and thereby support strategic thinking for tackling such problems. The value of the exercise comes mostly from the discussions and debates during the different stages of group discussion.

SESSION SUMMARY

Background (30 mins)

1. Start with relevant introductions and welcome, as appropriate based on how familiar the group is with Re.imagining activism, and whether the group has worked together before or is coming together for the first time.

   Explain the rationale for the exercise and, if relevant, how it fits in the wider training programme, or why it is relevant for the participants.

2. Introduce the topic by discussing the perspective of seeing the world in terms of a number of ‘systemic crises’ (Guide, p22-23, see Key Concepts below) such as ecological crises, social and economic crises, etc. You may want to refer to »the Workshop slides« to give a short presentation on these “crises”.

3. Explain Hartmut Rosa’s (German sociologist and philosopher) theory of acceleration and desynchronisation as a way of understanding how deeply rooted the causes of many of these “symptoms” are.

If you have time, you could show the video of Hartmut Rosa’s TEDx talk which provides a clear explanation of his theory.

Now is also a good time for questions and reactions by the group about the seriousness and nature of global crises and desynchronisation.

Group discussions (30 – 45 mins)

4. After covering this background information, you can start with the exercise. The purpose is to encourage reflection, dialogue and debate amongst participants in thinking about the root causes behind today’s crises.

Divide participants into groups of 3-5 people.

Invite each group to discuss what they think are the underlying reasons and problems leading to these global crises and desynchronization.

5. Now challenge each group to identify/summarise the key issues contributing to the global crises into 3 key root causes (ideally each cause should be no more than a few words long).

6. Now each group should merge with another group. The groups share their conclusions and have to again choose a maximum of 3 root causes of the global crises.

Plenary review (30 – 45 mins)

7. In plenary, each larger group explains briefly their final choice of root causes. They can write this onto a flipchart with an image of a tree, writing the root causes in the area under the soil where the tree roots are.

8. In plenary, facilitate a discussion with the group about what they learned during the exercise. You may want to probe them on:

   • How difficult was it to break down the causes of global problems into deeper causes? Why?
   • What were the challenges in having to prioritise some root causes over others?
   • Did this selection process help them understand the issues better in any way? If so, how?
   • What do they think about the final root causes which were identified – do these adequately represent our reality? What else could help give a more complete picture?
   • How could such an analytical method help them and their teams in their processes of strategic reflection on how to effectively address global problems?

» Hartmut Rosa TEDx Talk « (18 mins) March 2015, Why are we stuck behind the social acceleration?

» Review of Social Acceleration «

» (French) Le Monde, April 2016: Time and acceleration «

» Article by Gus Speth on the limits of growth «
Definition for 'root cause'

It is clearly a (or the) major cause of the symptoms.

It has no worthwhile deeper cause. This halts the asking of “Why did this occur? What is its cause?” at an appropriate point in root cause analysis.

It can be resolved. Sometimes it’s useful to emphasize unchangeable root causes in a model for greater understanding and to avoid trying to resolve them without realizing it.

Its resolution will not create other equal or bigger problems. Side effects must be considered.

There is no better root cause. All alternatives have been considered.

» Triggering Transition to the Sustainable Mode with Root Cause Analysis «

Root causes and desynchronization (p22-25)

A root cause is the deepest cause in a » causal chain « that can be resolved.

A logic of acceleration in modern societies lies at the root of the multiple crises we are facing. Technological progress accelerates the production of goods, contacts and choices, but the time we have available for these doesn’t change. Even though technological acceleration was intended to create more available time for the individual, we suffer from a constant time shortage by trying to do more things in the same amount of time. (p22)

There is a desynchronisation between different systems within society:

• Resources are used at an accelerating pace to feed an economy obsessed with growth, and nature cannot keep up.

• Digital globalisation and the fast paced consumer society lead to an alienation from space, from work and even from oneself. Burnout is a frequent consequence.

• Ever-faster wealth accumulation by some and the impoverishment of others who can’t keep up.

• Democratic decision-making processes that can’t keep up with the accelerating global economy and digital era. Politics becomes reactive. It leads to alienation of its citizens. (p23)

Ultimately what drives acceleration and therefore dysynchronisation is capitalism’s core element capital accumulation (interest and profit). These are the fundamental root causes underlying our global crises like climate change, poverty and inequality. Capitalism in its current form cannot live without growth and the pace of technological innovation is accelerating further and further. (p24)

The logic of growth can also be found deeply embedded in our mental and cultural conditioning. We are living in a culture of more. (p24)

From a feminist perspective it may also be argued that a fundamental root cause of all this is patriarchy (the capitalist system created by male dominance). (p24)