



# Cutting the issue

## HANDOUT

### The difference between a problem and an issue

A problem is something that you don't like about the world or your society, but that is too big and/or too vague to grapple with in any coherent way. Just thinking about them can be disempowering.

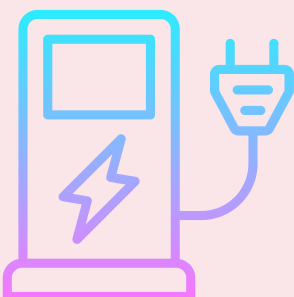
An issue is a more specific challenge that is separated out from the larger "problem". An issue is a solution or partial solution to a problem. 'Cutting the Issue' is a way to translate daunting, complex problems into realistic issues that can be tackled, in order to focus our efforts where change can really be achieved. This does not mean giving up on solving big problems; it is about recognising that big problems are solved, and social movement power is built, through a series of smaller campaigns.

For example, an issue you might "cut" out of climate change might be a campaign to stop a new coal-fired power station from being built in your community, controlling pollution from a particular power station in your community, or replacing an old coal-fired power station with renewable energy.

### PROBLEM: Climate Change

#### ISSUES:

- Adaptation to climate impacts
- Cutting emissions to mitigate climate impacts
  - Transport sector
  - Energy sector
    - Building renewables
    - Transitioning from coal
      - Coal mines
      - Coal fired power stations
        - Climate pollution
        - Air & water pollution
          - Environmental impact
          - Health impact
            - Health impact on communities
              - Power stations in communities
                - Controlling power station pollution

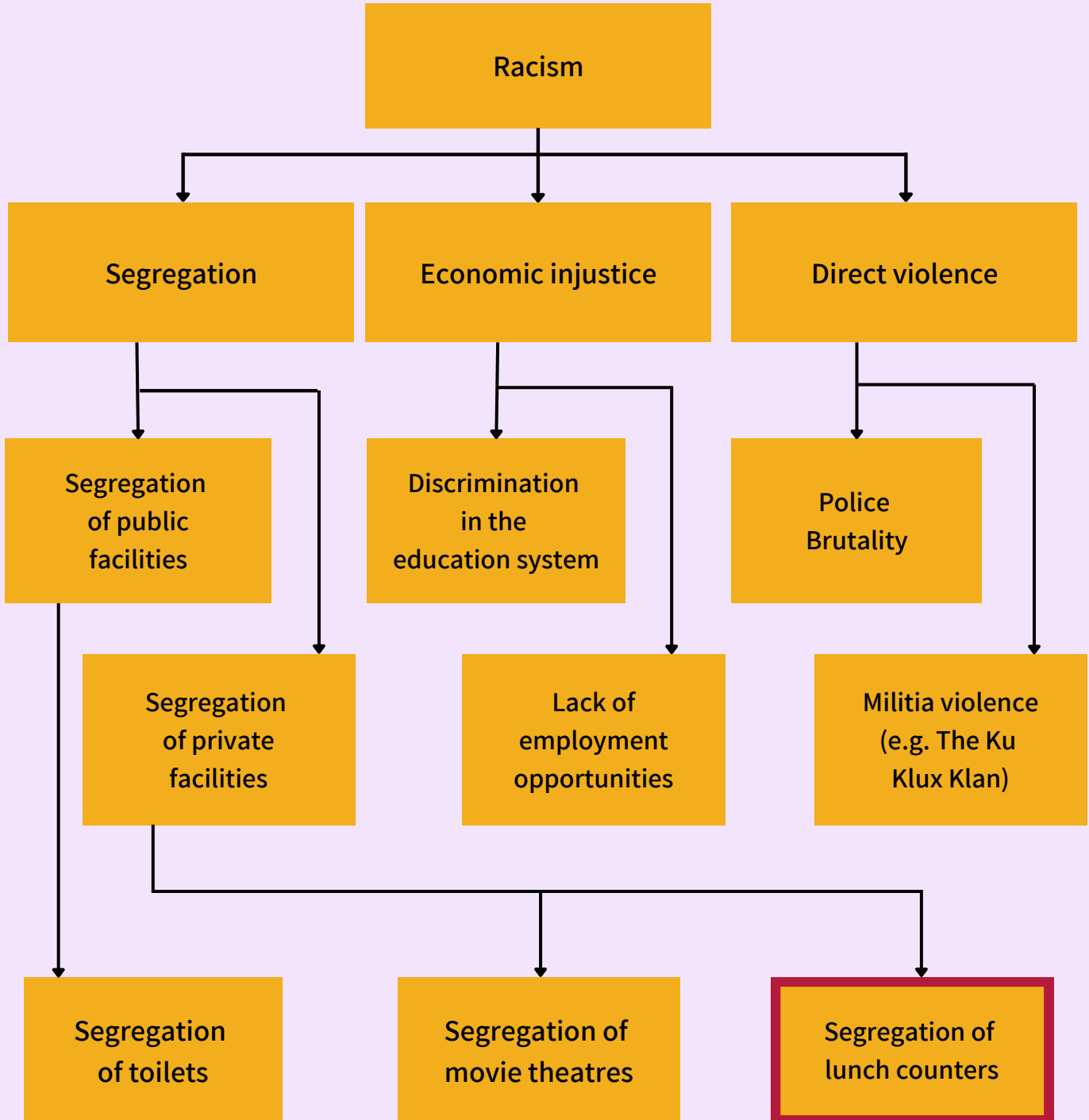


**Source:** Maxwell Smith, Community Organising Fellowship. Adapted from Lisa Veneklasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Power, People, and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, (Oklahoma: World Neighbors, 2007) <http://practicalaction.org/newweave>; Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists*, Third Edition, (Santa Ana CA: Seven Locks Press, 2001).

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# Cutting the issues in Nashville

Below is an example of how student activists selected an issue around which to develop a campaign to desegregate lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee, in the United States of the America. This campaign was one part of a much bigger civil rights movement. Other campaigns included the Montgomery Bus Boycott and voting rights.



Source: A Force More Powerful | Nashville: We were warriors, Jason MacLeod, Pasifka

## Criteria for cutting an issue

### WILL RESOLVING THE ISSUE:

1. Result in a real improvement in people's lives?
2. Give people a sense of their own power?
3. Build strong, lasting organisations and alter the relations of power?
4. Be winnable?
5. Be widely felt?
6. Be deeply felt?
7. Be easy to communicate and understand?
8. Have a clear target?
9. Have a clear time frame (that works for you)?
10. Build leadership?
11. Set your organisation up for the next campaign?
12. Have a pocketbook angle, which provides potential for raising funds?
13. Be consistent with your values and vision?

### **Result in a Real Improvement in People's Lives**

What you want is something that will be seen and experienced as a "real improvement" by as many of your constituents as possible, especially people who aren't yet a part of your organisation. Seeing and feeling a concrete change is usually the best motivation for people to continue to participate politically. Such achievements strengthen the resolve of current members while drawing new members in. In other words, they build power that you can use for even larger campaigns in the future.

### **Give People a Sense of Their Own Power**

Will the solution involve ordinary people, particularly those affected by the problem, in the advocacy effort? People need to know that they are key to the organising effort – that it is not just experts or NGO staff running the show. Giving people a sense of their own power demands careful constituency-building through participatory planning and action.

### **Alter the Relations of Power**

As community organisers, our goal is to generate sufficient power to win the social changes we seek. You want a campaign to result in some change in the power relations in your community, either because you have changed the structures that allow people to participate or because you have made your own and other related organisations stronger and better able to fight in the future. A "good" issue presents opportunities for people with less public and political exposure and access to decision making to practice citizenship and leadership.

### **Be winnable**

Success is the best motivation for sustaining citizen participation. Failure can be discouraging to people. Have a clear political and policy solution. But victory should not be defined only in terms of policy gains. Even a loss on a big campaign can still build power and organisation for the long run. Make sure that victories are broadly defined and set in modest, step-by-step terms. Then people can celebrate their achievements along the way.

### **Be Widely Felt**

You want to pick an issue that affects or concerns a broad range of people, because issues like these are likely to bring in the largest number of participants. Numbers affected will be an important source of power for your strategy. Politicians and decision-makers can more easily dismiss an issue when it is only felt by a small number of people.

### **Be Deeply Felt**

To get involved, people must feel strongly about the need for a solution. Anger, frustration and other emotions are motivators for action. Another way to say this is that it needs to be a “gut” issue.

### **Have a Clear Target and Timeframe**

An advocacy target is the pivotal decision-maker who can respond to your demands. Having a clear timeframe helps, as do benchmarks that allow people to celebrate small steps of progress. An issue campaign has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You should have an idea of the approximate dates on which those points will fall.

### **Build Leadership**

As community organisers, our goal is to generate sufficient power to win the social changes we seek. Our main form of power comes from organised leadership. This criteria is less about the issue you pick and more about how you pursue the issue. Provide opportunities for new leaders to emerge and develop.

### **Set up your Organisation for the Next Campaign**

You should always be thinking about how the current campaign will lead to the next campaign. The issue should lend itself to networking and alliance-building. It should present opportunities to strengthen organisations and build linkages between groups, creating a basis for future action.

### **Have a Pocketbook Angle**

There are two kinds of power: organised money and organised people. While we may not have a lot of money, it is very difficult to organise people without any money at all. Shifting power generally means shifting resources. So, if your issue provides opportunities to fundraise from interested constituents, it shows that there is support and resources for your issue.

### **Be Consistent with Your Values and Vision**

Enable you to further your vision and mission. You should not take up an issue that takes you outside your scope of work and your basic values. Consistency with values and vision also involves the tactics you use, the tools you use to try to influence decisionmakers



## Process

Once you have brainstormed a list of issues, apply this criteria checklist to determine which issue is the best focus for your campaign. Make an X if the issue fits the criteria. See which issue has the most Xs.

Criteria	Issue 1	Issue 2	Issue 3
Result in a real improvement in people's lives?			
Give people a sense of their own power?			
Alter the relations of power?			
Be winnable?			
Be widely felt?			
Be deeply felt?			
Be easy to communicate and understand?			
Have a clear target?			
Have a clear time frame (that works for you)?			
Build leadership?			
Set your organisation up for the next campaign?			
Have a pocketbook angle?			
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