FORMULATING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is the first and *most crucial step* in the research process

- The main function is to decide *what* you want to find out *about.*
- The way you formulate a problem determines almost every step that follows.

Every research study has two aspects:

1. **Study population**-

• People: individuals, organizations, groups, communities

(*they provide you with the information or you collect information about them)*

2. Subject area-

• Problems: issues, situations, associations, needs, profiles

• Program : content, structure, outcomes, attributes, satisfactions, consumers, Service providers, etc.

• Phenomenon: cause-and-effect relationships, the study of a phenomenon itself

Considerations in selecting a research problem:

1. **Interest**: a research endeavour is usually time-consuming, and involves hard work and possibly unforeseen problems. One should select a topic of great interest to sustain the required motivation.

2. **Magnitude:** It is extremely important to select a topic that you can manage within the time and resources at your disposal. Narrow the topic down to something manageable, specific and clear.

3. **Measurement of concepts**: Make sure that you are clear about the indicators and measurement of concepts (if used) in your study.

4. **Level of expertise**: Make sure that you have an adequate level of expertise for the task you are proposing since you need to do the work yourself.

5. **Relevance**: Ensure that your study adds to the existing body of knowledge, bridges current gaps and is useful in policy formulation. This will help you to sustain interest in the study.

6. **Availability of data**: Before finalizing the topic, make sure that data are available.

7. **Ethical issues**: How ethical issues can affect the study population and how ethical problems can be overcome should be thoroughly examined at the problem formulating stage.

The formulation of a research problem:

Working through these steps presupposes a reasonable level of knowledge in the broad subject area within which the study is to be undertaken. Without such knowledge it is

difficult to clearly and adequately ‘dissect’ a subject area.

1. Identify a broad field or subject area of *interest* to you.

2. *Dissect* the broad area into sub areas.
3. *Select* what is of most interest to you.
4. Raise research questions.
5. Formulate objectives.
6. Assess your objectives.
7. Double check.

So far we have focused on the basis of your study, *the research problem.* But every study in social sciences has a second element, *the study population* from whom the required information to find answers to your research questions is obtained.

As you narrow the research problem, similarly you need to decide very specifically who constitutes your study population, in order to select the appropriate respondents.