

CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Participatory Needs Assessments

What's the real problem?

Developing a Project Based upon Participatory Needs Assessments

Let's explore ways of determining community need based upon the vantage of the community members that you serve. Why is this important to do? As donors or NGOs and as human beings we are all guilty of assuming that we know what is best. But what is best for us may not be what is best for another person from another culture. We need to understand and acknowledge their perception of their needs.

What is a community?

A community is the group of people that you serve. They used to be called beneficiaries, but that term is being replaced by terms like partners, community members – or constituents. A community could be the members of a remote village, an urban home for senior citizens, or a group of primary school girls.

What is a project?

A project is a group of activities that you have theorized will provide long-term, sustainable solutions to community identified need. Sometimes project activities are called interventions, but this has a very top down, almost invasive sound to it; we prefer to call them simply activities. Your organization might focus on one type of activity – such as providing scholarships for school aged girls. Or your organization might combine clusters of activities into more complex projects.

Why Participatory Needs Assessments?

There are several very positive reasons for encouraging your community to participate in:

- the process of defining their needs/problems
- prioritizing their needs
- choosing the solutions to be used in addressing their needs

Let's look at a few of the reasons why inclusion is important:

1. Community members may have a greater depth of knowledge about their problems than we do, and so will be better able to identify important and underlying causes for the challenges they face.
2. If they are engaged in the process of needs identification, and feel their voice has been heard, then they will have a sense of ownership for the process and the outcomes; this leads to long-term project sustainability. Ownership can be thought of as the community's demand for the products and services that your organization will provide.
3. Working with a community to address their needs will develop trust on their part in working with your organization on future projects or activities.

First, we need to develop a relationship within the community.

Let's say you are planning to work in a small rural village. The first step is to meet with the village leaders and discuss your potential plans. With their support, you will be able to meet community members interested in participating in your project.

Communities are diverse and we need to be sure that we are working with a representative example of its members. Each subgroup of community members will have their own set of needs; some members may even be self-serving. Plus, there are many stakeholders in the development process: your organization, your donor, the local government, the village leaders. Each stakeholder has their own mission. You can begin to see that with all of the different stakeholders involved, it can be difficult to assess and prioritize real community need. You will need to choose which groups will be the most representational of overall community need.

We also need to exercise some critical self evaluation

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In an ideal setting, you would start your project design by entering a new village, developing relationships, and then engaging community members in the needs assessment process. However, even your own organization will complicate this process by coloring it with its own set of circumstances. For example:

1. Your organization has a specialty. Let's say that you focus on agriculture. How do you balance your organization's specialization with needs defined by the community that aren't agricultural in nature?

Potential solutions: You could partner with another NGO on this first set of needs that doesn't fit your specialization. You could decide to expand your organization's capabilities and receive training in a new specialty.

2. You already have a grant award which was designed to fund specific activities, and the activities don't exactly match the needs that the community defined.

Potential solutions:

A. You could partner with another NGO who does have funding for meeting the initial community needs.

B. You could see if your donor would let you 'pull' some of the community identified need into a component of your project – or exchange one set of activities for another.

C. You could seek additional grant funding for a second project that will address these needs.

3. What if the community comes up with a top-priority need that you don't think is important, or don't think it will do any good?

Potential Solution: You will need to weigh the costs and time investment of their priority against building goodwill and trust between your organization and the community.

4. What if you are already working in a community and have an established relationship and an ongoing project with them:

Potential solution: A community needs assessment at this point may be an excellent idea. It can give your organization qualitative feedback about your programming. Remember, this is all about long-term sustainability; if your community isn't buying into your current programming, it might not last very long after you leave. So a needs assessment will offer your organization two things: feedback for fine-tuning existing projects, and ideas for the next project and funding cycle.

Proceed to the [Ten Seed Lesson Plan](#) to get started.