

## Participatory Needs Assessment\*

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### Participatory Development

It is widely recognised now that development is not simply a matter of introducing technical improvements, however appropriate they may appear to be. What is more important is for people to be critically aware of their own situation and to be ready to change it whenever necessary. In fact when awareness and the desire for change become critical, the process of development assumes the character of self-determination and self-direction.

Development programmes, unfortunately, are all too often thrust on the recipients by community workers or extension agents who are generally trained to be mechanically attuned to 'official needs' rather than to the problems and aspirations of the people they are supposed to work with.

As Hapgood (cited in Cain, 1978:20) argues:

...unless people benefit from development efforts, no meaningful progress can result from foreign aid. It is equally true that unless the people contribute to development efforts, no meaningful progress can result from foreign aid.

What is needed is a more participatory process of development in which knowledge, values and the desire to change and plans for action would not be extended or handed out, but would evolve in a spirit of partnership between the most needy and oppressed groups in society and those who are working with them.

Development analysts such as Freire, Illich and others are structuring a philosophy of a "new moral order" of development and contributing much to the discussion of research and participation. Their emphasis is on a new relationship between community or development workers and community members - a relationship of collaboration, reciprocity and equity. This equity requires work at the "grass-roots" level with those affected by the project as well as at the government level.

The process involves both hierarchical and lateral relationships not only with the community but also with the people we work with in urban organisations. We are only too aware that in most situations decisions are made at the top by our superiors and we take them down to the people. The people are supposed to passively receive what has been perceived to be good for them by those who sit in offices.

Freire has much to say about the people not only as 'objects' but also as 'subjects' in the research and development process. He states that checklists and quantitative measures are insufficient when the reality of the people is to be defined.

The concrete reality for many social scientists is a list of particular facts that they would like to capture; for example, the presence or absence of water problems concerning erosion in the area, or those of production or productivity. For me, the concrete reality is something more than isolated facts. In my view, thinking dialectically, the concrete consists not only of concrete facts and (physical) things, but also includes the way in which the people involved with these facts perceive them. Thus in the last

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\* Opening address at the UNICEF Regional Training Workshop, November 1996.

analysis, the concrete reality is the connection between subjectivity and objectivity; never objectivity isolated from subjectivity. (Freire, 1974:134)

Paulo Freire insists on a new research relationship - the people as researchers:

...I have to go back, and instead of taking the people as the object of my research I must try, on the contrary, to have the people dialogically involved also as subjects, as researchers with me... Thus, in doing research, I am educated and being educated with the people. (Freire, 1974:135)

Freire's assertion emphasises that the people must participate as equal partners in whatever projects or programmes that may be intended for them. Participation is also a process where you as community workers can both educate the community groups as well as be educated by them through the problems, needs and experiences they may share with you.

### **Process of Needs Assessment**

As we examine the process of needs assessment the first question we may ask is "Who should define what people need?" Community and development workers have recognised that even when their views may be more logical (not always the case) and methods more efficient (not always the case), programmes and projects work best when people themselves determine their own needs.

Community and development projects seem to work best and are sustained when they come from the people. However, it is important to distinguish between the reality and the ideal. A pure "bottom up" approach is rare. We as community workers know that sometimes people are so locked into their own situation that it is difficult for them to know their own problems and needs. Familiarity and complacency about their own situations are often problems we face when we work in the communities.

It is important for us as community workers and as facilitators to use a variety of techniques to determine what the problem seems to be from our point of view, and to encourage the community members to say how they perceive their problems. But to determine needs in the community is a time consuming process. It requires sensitivity, careful negotiation and understanding of the network of relationships and the associated protocol, ensuring that the learning environment accommodates traditional behaviour and differences.

### **Cultural Context**

In encouraging the people to participate, it is important to understand that cultural norms and values are crucial for understanding change and effectiveness (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). This view supports that we as facilitators must recognise the cultural implications of the perceptions, experiences and values of the people.

Marshall and Rossman (1989) argue that:

One cannot understand human behaviour without understanding the framework within which the people interpret their thoughts, feelings and actions.

In relation to the above view it is important to note that when we are working in a particular cultural context, careful consideration must be given to structuring information that is sensitive to the cultural context we are working in. Before selecting the technique to be used, it is important to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of and sensitivity to the values and norms of the cultural context of the community. Therefore, in the gathering, selection and presentation of data, attempts must be made to reflect the language, likely experiences, roles and level of involvement of the individuals or their source groups. In practical terms, this means that whatever technique is used, whether it is the use of questionnaire, interviews or a participatory workshop, community workers must take into account the backgrounds, prior knowledge, language and the means of collecting information that are culturally-

acceptable to all those concerned.

## **Some Techniques that may be Used in Needs Assessment**

### **1. Observation Technique**

These involve observing people, comparing, analysing and trying to make sense of what you are seeking. In this process, it is important to be as "objective" and "scientific" as possible. One must avoid interpreting events or making judgements. By focussing on details that may normally be ignored, questions may emerge that can later be followed up with interviews and further observation.

Observation is useful when it is processed or thought about in order to yield insights and understanding. Recording events and incidents in a note book may assist in the formulation of questions to ask in conversations or interviews. Some of the information may not be of immediate use but reviewing it later may reveal other relevant areas.

### **2. Interviews**

There are a number of different ways in which interviews may be conducted.

#### **(a) Informal Interviews**

This is a friendly conversation where one can talk to a number of people asking culturally-appropriate questions. There are no pre-prepared questions.

The advantage of this technique is that people feel relaxed and comfortable and are not threatened. The disadvantage is that it is usually difficult to organise the data gathered.

#### **(b) An Interview Guide Approach (Semi-Structured Interviews)**

This involves the interviewer deciding on and preparing some general questions before-hand to guide the discussion. Although the research purposes or what you are intending to find out directs the questions asked in the interview, the content, wording and sequence are entirely at the discretion of the interviewer who has the freedom to explain, modify, or add.

The advantage is that it involves face to face interaction and information is collected directly. It also allows the interviewer to probe with more depth and clear up any ambiguities and misunderstanding that may arise during the interview. Another advantage is that more people are more willing to talk and react verbally than to write responses to questions. This is particularly relevant to our cultural context where culture is based on oral communication.

The disadvantage is that they are more expensive to administer and the process can be very demanding.

#### **(c) A Standardised Open-Ended Interview**

This is more formal where questions are prepared in advance and read to the person or people being interviewed. The interview is open-ended and it allows for a variety of responses. For example: What are the major health problems among women in this community?

#### **(d) A Closed Quantitative Interview**

The technique involves determining the possible responses in advance and asking people to choose between several alternatives. For example: *In the dry season my family suffers from: skin diseases? Heat rash? Headache?*

This type of interview is useful if certain information is required in a short time.

The latter two types of interview may also be written in the form of questionnaires, which however are only useful for literate respondents.

#### **(e) Community Workshop**

Another participatory method (which I have used in my research) is the workshop. Workshops are used to gather group data from selected communities. It is a way of conducting a group interview and according to Steward and Shamdasani (1990) workshops are widely used in market research for testing reactions to new products.

The group interview is useful particularly if you are working with an established group. Most of our communities in the Pacific are established groups with values and norms that influence their interaction and communication.

The use of workshops may be perceived to be relevant as oral rather than written communication is more commonly used. Maintaining group consensus and values is important to our communities. The consensus model of decision-making is pertinent to the Pacific cultural context as communal activities are based on co-operation and traditional obligations.

The use of small groups in the workshops optimises the opportunity for participants' participation and discussion of the questions and the development of group consensus. In small groups the participants are able to share their experiences and reflect upon them. Others in the group are able to provide feedback on community mode. The process of interaction with others provides the motivation to share and to clarify needs and problems.

The main drawback with workshops, particularly in an established group, is the power hierarchies which affect who speaks and what they say. A particular problem is when certain people dominate the discussions. In the Pacific context, it is usually the males, or those who have status in the community, who do this.

Another limitation of a workshop or group interview is that group consensus may suppress an individual's ideas. The views of young people, which are often contrary to adults' views, are often suppressed. Women's views too are also sometimes ignored or suppressed.

However, small groups used in the workshops should give the opportunity for individuals to contribute to the group report. If contrary views are expressed then individual follow-up interviews should be conducted.

### **Facilitating Group Discussions**

Whatever technique is used, it is important that it encourages the participation of the

people in the assessment of their own needs.

Working with people is a challenge. But assisting people to determine their needs is even more difficult. It requires sensitivity to the culture(s), patience, self-control, the ability to listen, skills in group facilitation but most of all the trust and faith in the ability of people that they themselves can determine their own needs. It is when people are involved in the process of identifying their own needs that they may feel an ownership of the programme or project that is formulated.

### **Some Hints for Facilitating a Group Discussion**

- Be positive. Smile.
- Communicate your enthusiasm for the meeting, the topic and the people involved.
- Communicate your interest in each individual's contribution to the discussion.
- Get to the point and keep to it.
- Write legibly and quickly.
- Speak loudly enough for everyone to hear easily and articulate your words, especially if you - or the participants - are struggling with a second language.
- Encourage discussion among group members instead of between members and yourself.
- Let participants know when you have learned something new from them.
- Come prepared. Bring paper, markers, etc.
- Practise the techniques you will use beforehand so you are not too nervous or lose your train of thought.
- Keep the meeting from getting into lengthy argument or discussion that

is off the topic. It takes some practice and skill to balance facilitator control with group participation. Use your tone of voice, your energy or "presence" and your interested silence to keep the group focussed.

I hope that in the two weeks of your workshop there will be interaction, sharing and learning from the facilitators as well as among yourselves. When you leave I hope you will be better equipped to facilitate participatory research techniques in the communities you work in.

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