Rural and Economic Development Programs

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Alternative Methods of Community Needs Assessment

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Many times elected officials, business leaders, and community groups want to improve their community, but they do not have a good handle on where to begin. It may be that don't know how the general public feels about a particular issue, or they don't have an understanding of past and current trends that are shaping the local economy. Without this information, they may start projects that are not acceptable to the public, or ones that do not address the real problem.

Needs Assessment is one strategy to help community groups learn more about their community, its problems, and potential solutions before planning projects and activities. Put simply, it is the process of learning more about the social, economic, and physical aspects of a community, as well as the interrelationships among these elements. The information can be *quantitative* (something you can put a number to) or *qualitative* (information such as the past history or a list of local leaders).

Needs assessment is an important tool in community development because it helps local groups understand important background information before programs are undertaken. Each community is unique, with its own set of problems, resources, past history, and potential for the future. A proper needs assessment can help a community make decisions that are appropriate to its unique set of circumstances. It is useful in:

- Identifying important community needs not currently being met
- Planning for the future
- Identifying resources to help in problem solving
- Encouraging local participation
- Marketing your community to new businesses

Needs assessment is a general approach to learning more about a community; there is no single method that works best in all cases. The following is a brief introduction to several different needs assessment methods. Along with an overview of the technique is a discussion of strengths, weaknesses, and resources needs to carry it out.

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a semi-structured interview of a group of 6 to 12 people that has been successfully used by marketing researchers, community developers and others to obtain insights and reactions to products, programs, or needs. Most often participants are selected at random or are chosen so as to represent different groups within the community. The strategy is to begin with a set of preselected questions but allow for flexibility so that the group can expand upon ideas. Five or six questions are usually enough, with the more direct and detailed questions coming later in the session. Focus groups are very effective in getting participants involved in an issue and making them feel that their viewpoint counts. Experience has found that the group interaction often stimulates discussion and produces data and insights which may be difficult to secure through individual interviews, surveys or through secondary data.

Focus group interviews are relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct. All that is required is a moderator, someone to record the discussion (could be a tape player), a predefined set of questions, a moderate size meeting room, and some refreshments and light snacks. One group interview could be completed in a two to three hour session, and for some issues more than one group may be interviewed. Focus groups work best at getting good feedback on alternative approaches to a problem or in exploring a new issue or problem; they are least effective in dealing with difficult or technical issues. The key to the success of a focus group is a skilled moderator; he or she must have the ability to keep the discussion flowing and encourage participation without influencing or intimidating participants.

USE OF SECONDARY DATA

There is a tremendous amount of secondary information about cities, towns, and counties that is available for public use. Secondary data is simply information collected by someone else that may be useful for needs assessment. Sources include The Censuses of Population, Housing, Business and Agriculture; vital records (births and deaths); data collected by state agencies (e.g., public school finances and enrollments; tax records); local administrative data (housing starts); and any other data collected for administrative or governmental purposes. Most of this information is available for free or at minimal cost, and it can provide excellent background information for community needs assessment. For example, the Census of Population can be used to find out the age composition of the population in a particular community, which might indicate particular age groups (such as the elderly) which require special services. Most grants require some type of secondary data analysis to justify need for particular services.

Secondary data is relatively inexpensive and easy to use, although there are peculiar aspects about different data sources that may require the assistance of a trained consultant. We are fortunate in that there is a tremendous amount of information available to us. However, since secondary data has been collected by someone else for other purposes, it may not be the exact information we are looking for. The information may be dated, missing key bits of information that we would like to have, or covering larger geographic areas than we would like. In most cases we will have to compromise when using secondary data. Because of this, it is best used as background information and as a supplement to other needs assessment methods.

COMPARATIVE SECONDARY DATA

One variant of secondary data is to use it as a comparative tool. It is often difficult to determine if a particular number is too large or too small unless there is a reference point. Thus, one strategy is to compare secondary data from a community with surrounding communities, the state, or the nation. For example, one can use data from secondary sources to compare per capita employment and sales figures of local retail, service and manufacturing firms with similar firms in the nation, state and similar sized communities. This data can be used to determine whether local firms are growing faster or slower than their counterparts in the state or nation. It can also help identify some gaps in the retail and service sector which are not meeting local needs. Another comparative approach is to look at data over time to determine how and if things are changing. Trend analysis often reveals important information for planning purposes.

As with the use of secondary data in general, comparative studies are relatively easy and inexpensive provided data are available. Using a comparative approach can greatly enhance the insights and provide better direction for what to do next. However, while the information is based on factual numbers that are often viewed as being more legitimate, it cannot always provide the deeper insights as to why things are different in one community versus another, or why things are changing. As a result, this approach is best used as background information or as a supplement to other methods.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informant interviews are conducted with selected individuals in a community who are involved with and/or aware of particular problems. Key informant interviews are a way to get "insider information" about an issue, problem, or need. It is a technique often used by journalists when they are preparing to write a story. These interviews can be used to define the nature and extent of an issue; to identify important issues related to the target problem; to enumerate community groups or organizations interested in or involved with the issue; to get an "insider's" view of the situation; or, to enumerate possible solutions from the perspective of those who are involved with or affected by the issue.

Key informants are persons who are either involved with the issue as a regular part of their job or as part of their volunteer activity, affected by the issue, or knowledgeable about the community and its citizens and its history. As one might expect, key informants may change from issue to issue. A "snowball" approach is often used to identify key informants; each interview with a informant asks for others who know something about the issue until the list of potential informants grows like a snowball rolling down a hill.

Key informant interviews are a quick and relatively inexpensive way to define the nature and extent of an issue and to identify potential solutions. These interviews help you to "see" the target problem from several different perspectives. Key informant interviews are also a way of identifying who are the "movers and shakers" in a community related to a particular issue. However, key informant interviews are useful only if you have been able to identify persons on all sides and with all views of the target problem. Moreover, it is possible that the views of key informants may not reflect the views of all the citizens or the different groups in the community. Key informant interviews also require a fair amount of time to make contact, arrange a meeting, and conduct an interview. Key informant interviews are most reliable when only one or two persons conduct the interviews since this helps to insure that the same kinds of questions are asked of all informants.

EXPERT PRESENTATIONS (EXPERT TESTIMONY)

Expert presentation or testimony involves having an *expert*, or someone who is particularly knowledgeable or experienced in a certain topic, make a presentation to a community group or decision-making body. This type of information provides in-depth analysis of a given issue from people who have technical backgrounds or experience which give them insights that are not available to the average person. For example, a doctor may be asked to speak about water borne diseases to a group that is meeting to decide whether the public water system needs to be upgraded. Or, a university professor may be asked to give expert testimony on changing population trends and their implications for small communities. It is common to have multiple experts testify either separately or as part of a panel.

Expert presentations are often invaluable to community groups who are dealing with new or highly technical issues. In many cases the testimony is free, although some experts may charge a fee or at least reimbursement for expenses. The value of this testimony depends upon the knowledge of the experts, and it is often wise to hear from several speakers, particularly when dealing with controversial issues. Expert testimony can be used most effectively in conjunction with information gathered from other needs assessment methods.

ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA SCAN

An environmental media scan is based upon the assumption that community needs and issues are reflected in the content of local media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, and newsletters of local organizations). The strategy is to form a scanning team with each member being assigned a small number of media outlets to review on a regular basis. A common form is developed and used by all team members as they record the topics appearing in their assigned outlets. Results from each team member's scan are then compiled on a periodic basis. Issues or problems within the community that are of concern to a large number of people should surface more often and give an indication of how important they are and how they are perceived by different groups.

Media scans have the advantage of being relatively inexpensive to conduct provided there is enough volunteer time. This method is effective at capturing changes over time, and when media are properly selected, providing input from a variety of community groups. Media scans are a good means of identifying issues and problems in a community, but are most effective when there are multiple media sources from which to scan. They may miss issues or problems that have not yet surfaced or been picked up by the media, so it is best to use this approach with one other needs assessment method.

SOCIAL SURVEYS

Social surveys are a useful method of obtaining information about knowledge, attitudes, or practices of the general population. It is based on the notion that people know the needs of their community, but often lack a way of expressing it to local leaders or public officials. Social surveys provide a method of asking a sample of people how they feel about certain issues that can be generalized to the whole population. Thus it provides a way to find out how the people feel about alternative programs, what services the community needs, and how well current services are meeting public expectation. The strategy is to select a representative sample of people (best done on a random basis); question them through a mail, telephone, or face-to-face interview; and tally the results for further analysis. If properly done, this approach provides useful and valid information about how the whole population, as well as particular subgroups, feel about issues and problems in the community.

While surveys can provide detailed information about the population of a community, this approach is one of the more expensive and demanding of needs assessment methods. Unless done properly, the results can be biased and misleading. The sample of people must be drawn randomly from a total list of people, or its equivalent. The questionnaire must be designed so as not to be biased, misleading, or ambiguous. Finally, analysis should be done by someone skilled in survey work and statistics. Because of these demands, most community groups will require expert assistance in order to carry out a valid social survey. Thus, while social surveys provide an excellent source of information, they should not be undertaken lightly.