IS NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN EXTENSION PROGRAMS RATIONALLY OBJECTIVE OR MOSTLY POLITICAL?

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ABSTRACT

Opinions differ on whether needs assessment in extension programs is carried out rationally, objectively and free of undue political influence. This paper raises issues such as: Is needs assessment rationally objective or mostly political? Is it a luxury or a necessity? Who should carry it out? Should program needs be determined by extension specialists or the clientele? Answers to these questions have serious implications on how rigorously they use needs assessment information. The way the information is used may ultimately determine the success or failure of extension programs. This paper offers some answers to the issues raised and therefore contributes significantly to our understanding of the concept of needs assessment.

1.　INTRODUCTION

For extension to succeed in its mission of improving the quality of life of its clientele, extension professionals must understand and respond promptly to their clients' short-term and long-term needs and problems. They must be evaluatively analytical and able to see beyond the obvious in their attempt to offer relevant and appropriate scientific knowledge to their target audience.

Many authors (Baker, 1987; Boyle, 1981; Dunn, 1981; Goulet, 1968; Kneubusch, 1984; Nzamnjo, 1991; Utzinger & Williams, 1984 and Witkin, 1984) agree that needs assessment is important in the process of initiating and implementing extension programs. Lack or poor needs assessment may lead to misperception or misunderstanding of clients' needs, priorities, and genuine response to technical advice and may cause program failure (Kreitner, 1989). Such misunderstanding, if allowed to exist, would be very costly to any nation in terms of wasted time and effort, persistent low yields due to inefficient production, low family incomes, poor adoption rates of extension recommendations, and slow rate of economic growth and development.

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Although many extension professionals agree that needs assessment is good and ought to be an integral part of program planning and implementation, they have different perceptions on the extent to which it is carried out rationally, objectively and free of undue political influence. Their options differ on whether the clients should be allowed, through the process of community empowerment, to determine all their program needs and priorities, or whether outsiders should determine some of the community needs. Some people perceive needs assessment as unnecessarily expensive in terms of time and resources and therefore a luxury that extension cannot afford (Brackhaus, undated and Scholl, 1989).

This paper attempts to answer the following questions: *Is needs assessment in extension rationally objective or mostly political?   Is it a luxury or a necessity? Should it be based entirely on client's perceived needs and interests or on the perceptions of extension specialists?* Different people with different experiences and backgrounds will respond differently to these questions and their perceptions will determine how they handle the process of needs assessment. Thus, needs assessment is a controversial issue. The way it is perceived and carried out has implications for all extension programs. If needs assessment is rationally objective, then its results will have scientific validity and reliability. Its results will have value and meaning for the clients and program planners alike. If it is mostly political and therefore fails to address the real needs of all clients without bias, should extension continue recommending its use in extension-education programs? Who should be involved in needs assessment? Should program needs be determined by experts or by the clientele? Answers to these questions affect extension systems around the globe. They have serious implications on how extension professionals view and carry out needs assessment and on how rigorously they use needs assessment information.

2.   THE CONCEPT OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

2.1   Is needs assessment necessary or is it a luxury?

Some people view needs assessment as a process that enables extension agents to identify and provide effective educational programs that address current needs of clients, while projecting emerging priorities (Kneubusch, 1987), plan forward and evaluate alternative solutions in order to make correct program decisions (Witkin, 1984), determine appropriate goals for various programs (Utzinger & Williams, 1984), and solve the right problems (Dunn, 1981). Other people view needs assessment as a luxurious and expensive exercise that extension cannot afford (Brackhaus, undated and Scholl, 1989). Proponents of needs assessment argue that its benefits far

outweigh its costs.   However, there is no consensus on this point. Should needs assessment always be carried out in extension education programs despite limited budgetary resources? This is a question that extension professionals have to confront as a matter of policy.   In answering this question, it is important to remember that the literature in favor of needs assessment is enormous. Proponents of needs assessment see the process as vital for the success of extension programs. They rationalize that it helps decision makers decide what priority programs should be funded or implemented first and which ones should wait until more funds become available.   It also helps decision makers to justify current or proposed programs as well as utilization of human and material resources (Brackhaus, undated).

However, needs assessment is not immune to political influence. Some people believe that it is so expensive, in terms of money and personnel that it should be avoided to save time and finances (Brackhaus, undated and Scholl, 1989). Politics is the art of exercising power in the competition for resources and in setting goals and priorities. Internal and external politics exert both constraints and influence that affect needs assessment when used by individuals or groups to determine which needs will be addressed. Political influence also affects the setting of program priorities because limited funds dictate that priorities be established for distributing scarce resources. Hence the need to establish criteria to distinguish among various demands for programs. Similarly, when the options of those involved in needs assessment conflict, efforts to exert influence may result. Finally, politics and funding are related because the issue of which needs will be met is affected by funding.

2.2   What is needs assessment?

Education experts differ (Baker, 1987) on the specific terminology they use to describe needs assessment but many people (Baker, 1987; Boyle, 1981; Brackhaus, undated and Kaufman, 1983) agree that *a need is the difference or gap between what is and what should be, in terms of the outcomes of extension programmes and determining the priority of these needs. It is something that can be shown to be necessary or useful for the fulfillment of some defensible purpose.* Democratically, a need is *a change desired by the majority of some reference group* (Witkin, 1984). An educational need can be satisfied by means of a learning experience (Baker, 1987) but for a change to occur, people must perceive inconsistency between themselves at present and the desired state proposed (Boyle, 1987). They must recognize and accept that a need exists. *The process of identifying and analyzing educational needs – deficiencies or problems – is called needs assessment.* Witkin (1984) *defines needs assessment as any systematic*

procedure for setting priorities and making decisions about programs and allocation of resources. This process is both *objective* and *value laden* and involves the collection and analysis of data from many different sources and the *resolution of many viewpoints*. It enlists the perceptions of people affected by, and those affecting, the program and does not end with the analysis of data but extends to the program-planning phase, guiding the selection of alternative solutions. Because community needs are continually changing (Baker, 1987), needs assessment is a continuing task. If a need is something desired by the majority how can we be sure that what the majority want is both good and rational? Is the majority always right? If the process of needs assessment is both objective and value laden, how can we avoid serving the interests of a few powerful individuals? These are issues that come to mind as one thinks about needs assessment.

McCaslin & Tibezinda (1997:39) contend that when needs are being determined, it is essential that distinctions are made between needs, wants, and interests. While needs refer to something considered necessary or required to accomplish a purpose, wants are considered desirable or useful, but not essential. On the other hand, interests indicate an individual's concern or curiosity about something. Experience has shown that it is not unusual for individuals to confuse needs, wants and interests. Thus, extension personnel interested in carrying out needs assessment of a given target group should ensure that they understand the meaning of needs.

2.3   Who should be involved in needs assessment

Extension clients should be actively involved in needs assessment, program planning and the direction of extension programs. They should not be used only to confirm what has already been decided but should participate in the programming effort, especially in establishing priorities, program content and policies (Adelaine & Foster, 1990). However, in most developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the gap between the level of technical knowledge of the extension agent and the client is so wide consequently that extension agents and foreign experts are often tempted to prescribe solutions to what they think are the problems of the target audience with little or no consultation with program recipients. This approach has caused many third world development programs to fail (Gonsalves, 1991; Goulet, 1968; Nzamnjo, 1991).

To what extent then, should clients be left to determine program needs and priorities? Giving the clients complete freedom to determine community programs based on their needs and interests, although may appear to be a

good idea, should not be carried to an extreme because some needs exist in the community which only the extension specialist can discover (Baker, 1987).

3.   CONTRIBUTION AND LIMITATIONS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A lot has been written to support the idea that needs assessment is useful and should be done to improve the quality of extension programs. Some of the positive contributions (advantages or strengths) of needs assessment cited in the literature show that it provides the information necessary for justifying extension budgets and grants and increasing people's awareness of community planning and support for public funds (Baker, 1987). It eliminates misperception of community needs (Kreitner, 1989), helps extension professionals to set program priorities (Kneubush, 1987 and Witkin, 1984), facilitates forward planning (Witkin, 1984), engenders people's commitment to extension programs (Goulet, 1968 and Nzamnjo, 1991), enables extension professionals to solve the right problems (Dunn, 1981) and establish a two-way communication between institutions and constituency groups in the service area (Agunga, 1989; Honadle, 1985 and Utzinger & Williams, 1984). Its limitations or (weaknesses) are that it is costly, time consuming and often carried out by people who have not been trained or those who are poorly trained to carry it out (Brackhaus, undated; Scholl, 1989).

If needs assessment has all these advantages that would help ensure program success, why do extension programs fail despite the fact that needs assessment usually precede program implementation in most cases? This problem is particularly serious in the third world where even World Bank programs have failed despite being preceded by needs assessment (Goulet, 1968). The major problem, in our opinion, is that many extension workers view needs assessment as a rationally objective activity and therefore fail to see, prepare, and address the political side of it. This problem, though less significant in developed countries such as the United States, is real in developing countries. Local and national politics, for example, were responsible for the failure of the World Bank sponsored integrated rural development programs (Goulet, 1968) in which program planners failed to understand local politics. They based program implementation on their understanding of people's problems, needs and interests. Although the programs were intentionally well planned to bring about economic progress, the planners failed to address people's social and cultural values which were the determining factor on whether the people accepted the programs.

If we view needs assessment only as rationally objective and fail to realize that decisions are primarily politically based and result from compromise among

diverse groups with different values, we shall be unable to prepare for the conflicts associated with determining community needs where people's opinions differ on community needs and priorities. We conceptualize needs assessment both as a technical and political process. For this process to have the greatest positive impact, it must be done democratically with the understanding that people feel a greater sense of ownership for programs, which they have helped in initiating and planning. Kemp (1991) is right in saying that people should be consulted when determining what their needs are. Besides, Goulet (1968) contends that development programs should not be imposed. However, people empowerment or effective consultation does not always mean that development programs should be based entirely on people's perceived needs. There are some important needs that exist in the community which only the extension specialist can discover (Baker, 1987). Consequently, extension professionals should use their technical and communication skills in helping the community to be aware of needs which are not easily apparent to them and should ensure that the needs are included in the development programs for the good of the entire community. While it is very important for extension professionals to be rational and objective in carrying out needs assessment, they cannot avoid to be subjective (Witkin, 1984). Neither can they avoid politics (Scholl, 1989). Therefore, they should strike a balance to ensure that recommendations resulting from needs assessment are accepted and used effectively by people who have an interest in the subsequent programs. Many decisions are made within the context of a political environment and extension professionals should never ignore this fact. They should realize that politics may have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, politics may be used to generate support for needs assessment, increase funding or increase the use of needs assessment information. On the negative side, politics destroy program support or cut program funding. Extension professionals should know how to handle political influence to benefit the programs.

4.   APPLICATION AND IMPLICATIONS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Not everyone realizes the importance of needs assessment and a large number of those who do may lack training in carrying it out. For this reason, people involved in needs assessment, particularly administrators and other people in authority, need to know and understand the process. Those who lack this knowledge should be trained to enable them make informed decisions when dealing with matters related to needs assessment, program planning, and program implementation. We should never assume that the rationale we use in needs assessment is acceptable to all the people who affect, or are affected by, the program. Therefore, we should carefully and constantly consult with

all the stakeholders. Effective consultations, through the process of people empowerment in needs identification and decision making, makes it easier for needs-assessment-based recommendations to be the product of joint effort and to receive maximum community support. We should take the responsibility of making extension program recipients aware of needs that may not be obvious to them but which affect their lives.

If needs assessment is intended to influence decision-making, we should determine who the decision makers are, their relative importance, the decisions they need to make, what they need to know and how and when they want the information presented. In Additions, we should be familiar with the amount of conflict involved in decision-making. For example, the amount of loss or gain that one may experience as a result of making a certain decision. Since people's needs, problems, interests and priorities are continually changing, extension professionals should make needs assessment an integral part of their daily activities and should keep proper records which could be used in future to identify sources of problems and detect causes of program failure in order to avoid past mistakes. Finally, extension professionals should use several methods or techniques of needs assessment to improve validity and reliability of the resulting information and should be sensitive to possible sources of political influence in order to avoid unnecessary conflict or the temptation of basing their reports or findings on unethical decisions. They need to be credible, honest, believable, trustworthy, non-judgmental and willing to learn from program recipients. With this approach, they can establish rapport with the community and give its members positive impressions or experiences of working with extension professionals as partners in development.

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