

Issue identification

Description The first step before any development intervention is usually to identify the issue that needs to be addressed. Development projects, advocacy initiatives and education are ways to address the problem. Only through analysing the causes of the problem will communities be able to see which interventions will be the most appropriate.

The issue may be quite obvious, such as lack of land or unaffordable education. However, sometimes it is not immediately clear and a community or group needs to go through a process of identifying their needs and the issues they want to address.

Learning objectives

By the end of the section, participants will be able to:

- reflect on the role of outsiders in identifying a problem and solution
- identify key issues and needs in their area
- prioritise these issues.

Links This is closely linked with SECTION C2 (Research and analysis). In practice, the two sections will often overlap. It is also linked to SECTION A4 (Good practice in advocacy).

EXERCISE 3 **How to approach a community**

A role play adapted from *Training for Transformation: Book 1*, p94



Aim To show that leaders or facilitators need to trust people's insights into their own problems.

Role play 1

Four villagers are waiting for a meeting to begin. The community development officer (CDO) comes in, clearly in a hurry to proceed, and greets everyone. The CDO asks each person how they are and each speaks of a different problem that is troubling them, such as unemployment, a drunken husband or no clean water. The CDO hardly listens and then starts the meeting by saying that the village needs a clinic and that there is money set aside from the local government. However, the CDO tells them that they will need to lobby hard to get it. The CDO instructs one villager to organise a public meeting to raise awareness, another to persuade her husband (the pastor) to go to the local government and ask for the money, and another to go and speak to a similar group in the next village to find out about similar experiences. During the meeting, one of the villagers becomes more passive, one gets sleepy, one looks out of the window, one argues with the CDO but gives up quickly and so on.

Role play 2

A different CDO comes to a different village and greets the members waiting for the meeting to begin. This time the CDO listens carefully to each person's issues, questions them a bit and agrees that they need to discuss the problems at this meeting. Each participant is asked what they think is the most pressing issue in the village. One says there are too many drunks in the village and this is a threat to the children – and suggests they approach the church and bars to help. A second villager agrees with the first one but the third one disagrees and proposes a water pump because the main need is lack of clean water. The CDO is not convinced that tackling drunkenness is the main priority, but listens and questions some more. Eventually, all villagers agree that tackling drunkenness is the best idea, and they start planning who will approach the bar owners, how the church can help and so on.

The facilitator should lead a discussion using the following questions:

Questions for discussion

- How did the CDO behave in each village?
- How did the villagers react in each situation?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
- After 6 months, what do you think would have happened in the two different cases?
- In real life, which approach have you seen most often? What have been the consequences?
- Which approach is better?

Key points

- Solutions and understanding from the outside will not lead to empowerment of those involved and is unlikely to lead to a lasting solution.
- To empower people, a facilitator needs to listen to others, question them and go along with their decisions.
- One person is not likely to know the needs of everyone in the community. Care needs to be taken to seek views from a wide range of people, not just the community leader.
- It is also important to speak to women and children because men often 'assume' what their needs are.

Tools 1–4: Identifying needs



Aim To work with a community or group and help them identify their needs.

There are numerous tools that enable communities to identify their needs, and many of these are in other community development manuals, particularly those on Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA). A few are outlined below to highlight some of the options open, but for more detail you should

refer to these other manuals, such as the *IIED Trainers Guide to Participatory Learning and Action* (see Resources section). Most of these tools can either be led initially by an outside facilitator or driven by the community right from the start.



TOOL 1 **Chatting and listening**

This tool is about listening for the issues about which people have the strongest feelings, recognising that these are the issues on which they are most likely to act. A team of people (such as health workers, development workers and village members) ask a village, community or group questions to enable them to express their needs. Questions should aim to address what people are worried, sad, happy, fearful, hopeful or angry about. The questions need to be open-ended but the questioners also need a clear idea of what they are looking for, so that they can make sense of the answers (see TOOL 5).



TOOL 2 **Semi-structured interviewing**

This tool enables greater understanding of the issues. It involves sitting down with key people in a community in order to discuss their knowledge, experience and understanding of the issues. Key people might include health workers, traders, religious leaders, heads of village committees and teachers. These people might be those who are already involved in trying to get things done, those who the community or individuals turn to in times of crisis or those who are seen as the ‘heart’ of the community. At this stage, you are not speaking to everyone or gaining consensus, but trying to build up a clearer picture of needs. Use open-ended questions such as:

- What are the main problems you come across in your area of work?
- What are some of the most common illnesses (if health worker), reasons for not going to school (teacher), etc?
- What are the main pressures that people are facing in the community?
- What simple measures could be taken to improve the situation?



TOOL 3 **Focus groups**

This tool is used with a group of people, and helps them to understand some of the needs and problems that people face. A focus group enables people with different views to discuss their differences, challenge assumptions and start to come to a collective understanding of the needs of the community. It also means that the community explore issues together right from the start. Questions to stimulate discussion could include:

- What are the main pressures that people in the community are facing?
- What simple measures could be taken to improve the situation?
- If you could change one thing in this community, what would it be? Why?



TOOL 4

Community mapping

This tool involves community members drawing a map of their community, either on paper or outside on the ground, using whatever resources are available. Participants are given little guidance about what to include, and the important point of the exercise is to discuss what people have drawn. Questions to include could be:

- How did you decide what to include? What was excluded?
- What was emphasised? Which are the most important parts?
- What was difficult to represent? What were the areas of disagreement?
- What can you say from the map about the needs of the community?

Further information

Other useful tools for identifying needs include transect walks, seasonal calendars, Venn or chapatti diagrams and wealth ranking. These can all be found in the *IIED manual* (see SECTION C6).



TOOL 5

Agreeing priority needs

Aim To prioritise needs from grouped needs.

After the research, the community or external questioners need to group the answers according to the main needs expressed. It does not necessarily matter how these are grouped, as long as people can see where their original expressions of concern fit into the framework that you present to them. Once the needs are grouped, the community can come together and decide for themselves which of them are priority needs. If an external organisation is involved in advocacy 'for' or 'with' a group or community, then the organisation needs to work with the community to collectively decide the priority needs.

Method

- List the needs as you have grouped them on a sheet of paper (see below for example).
- Ask participants to rank them 1–5 in order of priority.
- Participants then get into small groups to discuss each person's answers and arrive at a collective ranking for each group.
- The whole group comes together and writes up the answers of the smaller groups on paper, discusses if there are any differences and tries to prioritise the main issues.

An alternative approach is to write all of the issues onto separate flashcards and ask participants to place them in order in a line from most important to least important. The process of moving the cards around stimulates greater discussion and negotiation.

Example sheet before being filled in

	INDIVIDUAL RANKING (1-5)	GROUP RANKING (1-5)
A land		
B clean water		
C shelter		
D clothing		
E school fees		
F food		
G money to expand business		
H educational facilities		
I better housing		
J sanitation		
K etc.		

Key points

- This should lead to the prioritisation of the main issue on which to consider a development intervention, and the possibility of an advocacy intervention.
- There may be more than one main issue to start with, and the group will have to choose at some point whether they want to tackle all priority issues or just focus on one at a time.
- SECTION C2 develops this understanding through other research and analysis tools.
- If these tools do not lead to a clear issue on which to undertake advocacy, it may be necessary to go through some of the research and analysis in SECTION C2 and come back to SECTION C1 once people have a clearer understanding of the situation.

