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# Project identification

## Responding to a need

### Read Nehemiah 1

Nehemiah was a Jew in exile in a foreign land. Some of the Jews had returned to Judah after their attackers, the Babylonians, were overthrown by the Persians. But many of the Jews felt settled where they were and so remained in exile.

- What concerned Nehemiah in verse 2?

- What news did Nehemiah's visitors bring? (verse 3)
- What was Nehemiah's reaction to the news? What does this say about his character?
- How does this passage challenge us in our relationship with God and with local communities, and in our response to others?

The first step in the project cycle is to identify an issue that a project could address. This usually involves a 'needs assessment' which finds out what community needs are and whom they affect. Only when we know what people really want can we develop an effective project.

The needs assessment is followed by a 'capacity assessment' to see what strengths the community has which it can use to address its problems. The project should seek to strengthen any weaknesses. Some people prefer to use 'appreciative enquiry' instead of needs assessment and capacity assessment. This, in effect, starts with a capacity assessment by asking community members to identify the resources they have and then asks them how they want to use them in the future. The tools on the following pages can be used or adapted to help community members identify their vision. The project can then aim to help the community achieve part of its vision.



### Needs assessment

We might already have a good idea of local needs. They might be quite obvious, or we might have become aware of them during a past project. On the other hand, we might have no idea what a community's needs are. It is important to carry out a needs assessment before planning development work, whether we think we know what the needs are or not.

- The project should come out of what people say they want and not from assumptions that we make.
- Sometimes the needs are not immediately clear or cannot be easily understood.

- By talking to different people, we will be able to understand how problems affect people differently. For example, poor access to clean water may affect women more than men because women have to walk a long way to fetch water.
- Circumstances change:
  - There may be new people in the community.
  - There may be new needs.
  - Old needs might have been addressed.
  - Problems might be affecting people differently.
- Needs assessment gives people an opportunity to prioritise their needs, which leads to a more sustainable development project.

The time spent carrying out a needs assessment may vary according to the contact we have had with a community in the past. In general, needs assessment is done fairly quickly. At this stage, we are trying to gain an impression of needs and who the project beneficiaries might be. We are not looking for too much detail. Further research into stakeholders and causes and effects of the problem is carried out during the design phase of the project cycle.

Try to talk to a variety of people, such as key community members or representatives of community groups. Or use methods that can draw out the views of many people in a short space of time, such as community mapping. We do not want to be raising expectations or wasting people's time. Make sure that the people we talk to include women, men, girls, boys, the elderly, people with disabilities etc.

There are many tools that enable communities to identify their needs. A few tools are outlined below as examples of some of the options available. These tools can be adapted for the capacity assessment.

#### Asking questions

The kind of questions we ask makes a difference to the information we can gather. Asking the wrong kind of questions will limit the information discovered. The important thing is to avoid closed questions where people can answer only yes or no. For example, 'Isn't the new health post wonderful?' Try to use open-ended questions which allow the person replying to give more information. For example, 'What do you think of the new health post?'

Listen carefully, and explore people's answers. It is useful to have some key questions in front of us, but be careful not to miss the answers because we are preparing the next question. Be flexible and be ready to ask unprepared questions if someone says something interesting. To explore people's answers, questions normally begin with one of the six 'helping words': What? When? Where? Who? Why? How?



## TOOL 1 Listening

By listening for the issues about which people have the strongest feelings, it is possible to identify the issues that they most want addressed and projects which they are most likely to participate in. A team of people (development workers or village members) ask a community or group questions to find out what people are worried, sad, happy, fearful, hopeful or angry about. The questions should be open-ended. It is important to have a clear idea about what we are looking for so we can make sense of the answers.



## TOOL 2 Interviewing

This tool helps us to gain greater understanding of the issues. It involves talking to key people in the community in order to discuss their knowledge, experience and understanding of the issues. These people might already be involved in community development activities,

they might be people that the community turn to in times of crisis or those who are seen as the heart of the community. Key people include health workers, traders, religious leaders, village chiefs, pastors and teachers. When choosing people to interview, make sure their views and opinions are likely to represent those of others in the community. Take care not only to interview the powerful, but also to interview those whose views are not usually heard.



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Use open-ended questions such as:

- What are the main problems you face in your area of work?
- What are the main pressures that people in the community face?
- What simple things could be done to improve the situation?



## TOOL 3 Focus groups

This tool is used with a group of 10–20 people. It helps them to understand and voice some of the problems they face and the needs they have. A focus group enables people with different views to discuss their differences, challenge assumptions and come to a collective understanding of the needs of the community. By exploring issues together from the start, communities start to own the development intervention.

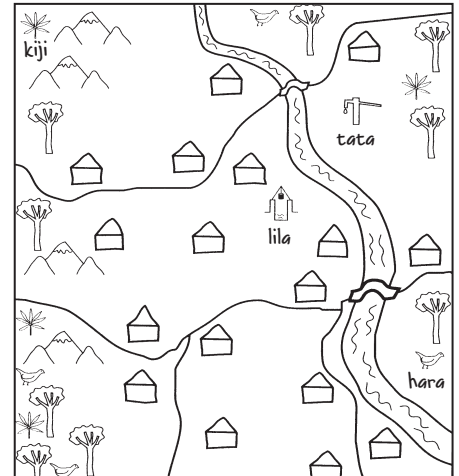
Questions to stimulate discussion could include the following:

- What are the main pressures that people in the community are facing?
- What simple things could be done 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 to tell their story together. They draw either on paper or outside on the ground, using whatever resources are available. They are given little guidance of what to include. The important point of the exercise is to discuss what people have drawn. The map might show the natural and physical resources in the area – forests, rivers, roads, houses, wells. It might show important people and organisations.



Once the map has been drawn, encourage discussion by asking questions such as:

- 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 we learn from the map about the needs of the community?

To gain greater understanding of the issues facing different groups within the community, the groups should work separately. A map by young people may show very different information from that of older women.

Questions for discussion could include:

- What differences are there between the maps?
- Why are there differences?
- How does the information from each map help to make a more complete picture of the community?

### Agreeing priority needs

Once the needs have been identified, community members should be given the opportunity to say which needs they feel are a priority. Ask them to group their needs into general issues such as water, health, land and food. It does not necessarily matter how they are grouped, but it is important that people can see how their concerns have been included.

Once the needs have been grouped, community members can decide which of the issues should be given priority. Write all of the issues onto separate pieces of paper. Community members then place them in order in a line from the most important to the least important. Encourage them to discuss and negotiate with each other and to move the pieces of paper around until they all agree.

Alternatively, write or draw the needs on separate paper bags. Give each person six seeds, stones or beads to use as counters. Each person in turn is invited to put their counters in the relevant bags, according to their priorities. They should put three counters for their first priority, two for their second and one for their third priority. The counters in each bag are then counted and the results announced. The needs are ranked according to the results.

This tool should help to identify the main issue to address. There may be more than one priority issue to start with and the group will have to choose whether to take all priority issues at once or focus on one at a time.

## Capacity assessment

Communities should be encouraged to use their own capacities and resources to address the problems they face. It is therefore important to carry out a capacity assessment after needs assessment to identify strengths that the community could use to address the problems they identified earlier. The project, if needed, should focus on strengthening the community's capacities to address their problems. By doing this, we are facilitating the community to address their problems rather than addressing their problems for them.

Capacity assessment involves six types of assets:

**HUMAN** These enable people to make use of their other resources. They include skills, knowledge, ability to work and good health.

**SOCIAL** These are based on relationships and include organisations and groups within the community, political structures and informal networks.

**NATURAL** These form the local environment and include land, trees, water, air, climate and minerals.

**PHYSICAL** These are man-made, such as building, transport, water supply and sanitation services, energy sources and telecommunications.

**ECONOMIC** These are things that people can use to sustain their livelihoods, such as money and savings, grain stores, livestock, tools and equipment.

**SPIRITUAL** These include faith, scripture, guidance and prayer.

Using participatory techniques, such as those used for the needs assessment, ask community members to identify their capacities. Remember to ask a range of community members, as different people have different perspectives.

Write the capacities onto a large piece of paper and ask community members to identify how they could be used to address the problems identified during the needs assessment. Then ask community members to think about which capacities should be strengthened so that they can start to address their priority problems themselves. This is what the project should focus on.

Decide whether it is realistic for our organisation to strengthen the community’s capacity to meet the priority need:

- Does meeting the need fit in with our mission?
- Does meeting the need agree with our values?
- Does meeting the need fit into our strategy?
- Will meeting the need be too risky?
- Do we have enough experience?
- Do we have enough resources?

**EXAMPLE**  
of a Capacity  
Assessment chart

Asset type	Capacities
Human	Construction skills Strong self-help tradition Women make local handicrafts
Social	Community centre Church building Local primary school
Natural	River
Physical	Good access to city centre Internet café nearby Water standpipes
Economic	Revolving fund Income from trading in city centre
Spiritual	Servant leadership Unity among church members

**Concept notes**

Once a need has been identified which a project can address, write a concept note. A concept note outlines the project idea. It does not have to contain a lot of detail and may only be about two pages in length. The reason for writing a concept note before a full proposal is so that our organisation’s leadership or a donor can gain an idea of what we hope to do. They can ensure it fits with strategy, check its relevance and quality and give feedback before a lot of time, effort and resources are spent planning the project. If an organisation does not have a process for checking projects at this stage, it should consider setting one up. The members of staff responsible for appraising concept notes should ask the questions at the top of this page.

Concept notes should outline:

- background information
- why the project is necessary
- who will benefit from the project
- how they will benefit
- an estimate of both the total budget and the resources needed for design.