THADDESA MITHRAM

(KERALA LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICE DELIVERY PROJECT)

NEED ASSESSMENT TRAINING FOR NGOs & LSG FUNCTIONARIES

READING MATERIALS

2016

A Note on Needs Assessment and Prioritization of Development Projects

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1. Introduction:

Making informed and justifiable decisions – decisions that achieve development results-is a prerequisite for sustainable progress in any sphere of activity. While formulating projects for the development of backward Local Self Governments (LSG's), the first consideration should be to ensure that these projects reflect the felt and the most urgent needs of the people. Scientific methods of assessing needs and prioritizing projects with people's participation are discussed in the following pages.

2. Assessment of Needs:

With very little time available, one has to resort to Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques so that time and efforts are minimized and people's needs are reasonably reflected to enable better results. The development reports (VikasanaRekha) of the LSG's readily available have the scenario of the development needs of the area. An appraisal of the projects submitted to the District Planning Committee (DPC) by the LSG concerned during the previous years but not approved for want of funds etc., can also help in identifying unattended development needs of the LSG. Discussions with key informants, who are well versed with the development needs of the LSG can also help in this regard. Transect walks can also help in providing current and realistic assessment of the area. These needs have to be triangulated/cross verified with the current perceptions of the people. For this, the 'Focus Group Discussion 'method can be employed. The details of this technique are appended.

3. Prioritization of Development Projects:

It is quite natural that an LSG will have scope for many development projects to meet the people's requirements. But time, resource and other constraints have to be reckoned and the most important development projects have to be prioritized with people's participation to augment their ownership and involvement in project implementation for achieving the desired results. Though many tools are available in this regard, the'Matrix Ranking/Scoring' method is a time- tested and reliable method in the Kerala context. The details of this methodology are appended.

4. Epilogue:

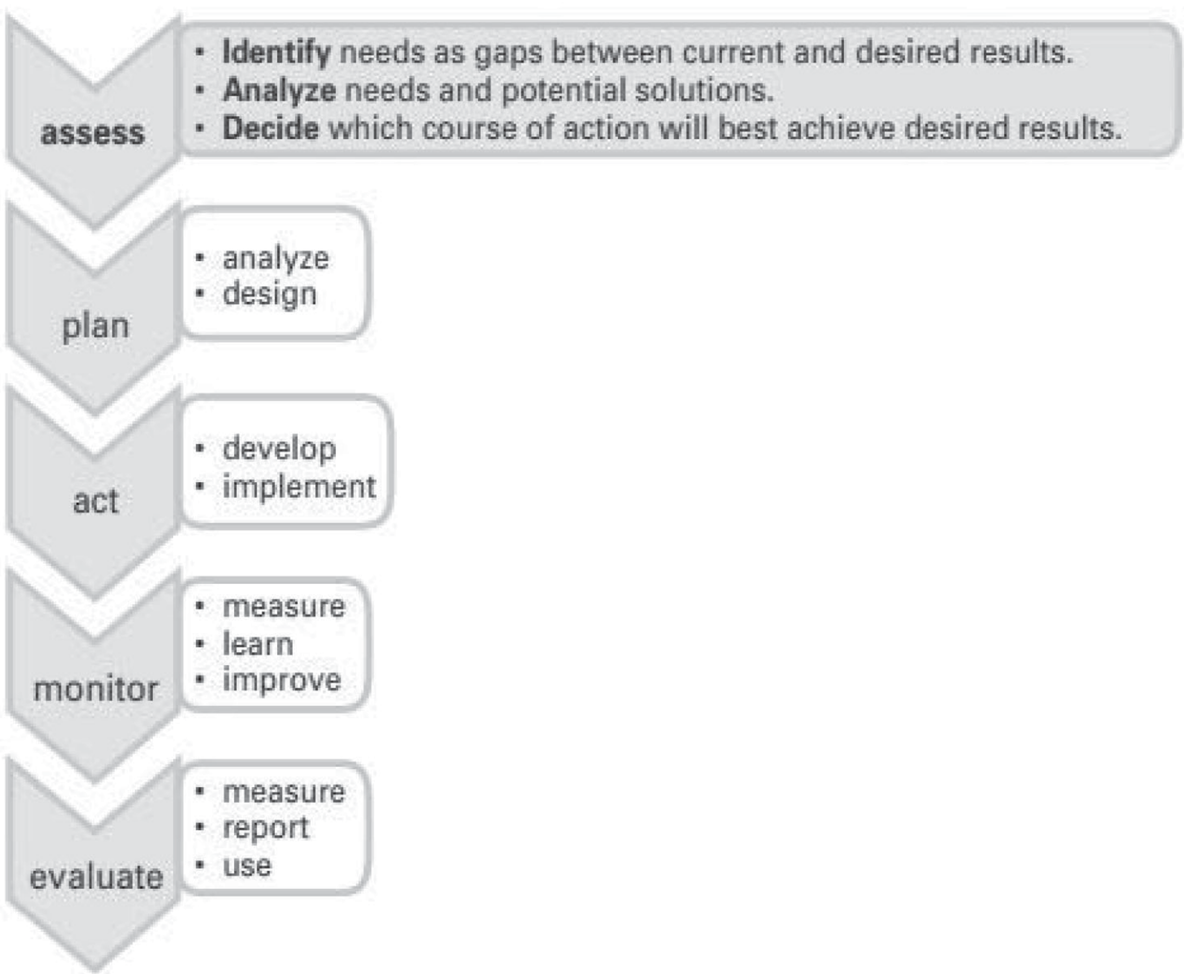
While there are good number of methods for needs assessment and prioritization of development projects, the understanding and skills of the personnel who are facilitating these methods have to be fine-tuned with training programs for greater impact.

TECHNIQUES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND PROJECT PRIORITIZATION

From deciding which computer to buy, to determining how to improve the living conditions of poor people, numerous decisions must be made every day. Many are routine; others are extraordinary. Some are complex; some are rather straightforward. At times, the decision is yours alone, or it may require collaboration with partners or clients. Some decisions are guided by policies, others by laws, others by traditions, and still others are unique to the situation. Regardless of the characteristics, all of us make decisions that sometimes lead to useful results. At other times—well, most of us would rather not talk about those other times when our decisions led to less-than-desirable results.

Making good decisions about what to do is not easy, nor should it be taken for granted. All of us must continually work on improving our ability to make quality decisions as we study and reflect on what leads up to our making a decision and taking action. The change may come through coaching by a mentor or attending a training course.

Steps:



Within a performance improvement framework, needs assessments play a critical role in starting the improvement process. Assessments inform future decisions; at the same time, they are informed by the results of past decisions. Needs assessments thereby link together past and future performance, guiding decisions throughout the improvement effort.

Tools and Techniques to Consider

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Purpose

The purpose of conducting focus groups is to collect information from a small group in a systematic and structured format (see box). An effective focus group is designed around a clear and specific goal. Participants interact with a facilitator who presents the participants with questions designed to yield insight into current or desired results in relation to a specific topic or issue.

Box - Sample Uses of Focus Groups
• Collect information on current needs.
• Validate the results of a survey.
• Define the desired results.
• Identify potential solutions.
• Define strengths and weaknesses of potential solutions.

Needs assessment applications to get information required to complete a needs assessment will oftentimes require that you interview (or have a focused discussion with) a number of people at the same time. The focus group is an opportunity to gain valuable information related to both current results and desired results at each level of the program or project results chain. Although focus groups can also be used to identify alternative activities to improve performance, during your needs assessment it is important to maintain attention (focus) on the collection of information that will help you identify (a) valid needs (or gaps between current and desired results), (b) evidence to support the validation of those needs, and (c) information that will allow you to prioritize needs before selecting a course of action for addressing the high-priority needs.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Through a focus group format, multiple people can be interviewed at one time.
- Focus group discussions allow members of the focus group to build on each other's comments and reactions. This approach can yield a synergy of discussion around topics or themes.
- Focus groups can help people come to consensus and make challenging decisions (such as prioritizing needs).

Disadvantages

- Group members may not contribute equally to the discussion in a focus group format. More reserved members may not feel comfortable inserting their contributions in the discussion. Other participants may try to dominate discussions.

- Gaining information from the group can be challenging. There is a risk of “groupthink” that can emerge through this process, thus diverting the discussion and making it hard to refocus the group on different issues.
- Discussions may take too long to cover all of the relevant topics and to offer everyone a chance to participate.
- Because of the presence of others, participants may not feel comfortable sharing more sensitive information or views.
- Focus groups are often poorly done, particularly if the focus group facilitator is not experienced in managing focus groups. Focus groups can easily get “off task” if the facilitator does not maintain structure and control throughout the process.

Process

1. From the list of information required for the needs assessment, identify those elements that may best be attained through focus groups. For instance, identification of needs, validation of needs, root causes of needs, and alternative solutions identification, or a combination of these.
2. Prioritize the information requirements for each focus group, and use this ranking to create a facilitator’s guide or protocol for each focus group.
3. Select a decision-making technique for each focus group. Although unstructured focus groups may be useful on limited occasions, more structured techniques are often valuable and can ensure that the focus group provides the information you require for making needs assessment decisions.The ‘Matrix Ranking/ Scoring’ technique can be used for prioritising the development needs.
4. Create a facilitator’s guide or protocol to guide each focus group. Ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results of the needs assessment are represented, along with the required information at each level of the program or project results chain.
5. Locate an experienced facilitator, if possible, as well as a note taker. Using an experienced focus group facilitator will generally lead to better results than if you facilitate the group yourself; however, you may want to be present as a backup note taker during the focus group to capture some of the data first-hand.
6. The facilitator can use the facilitator’s guide or protocol to generate a few specific questions that can be used to open the discussion in the focus group (or to come up with the questions, he or she can also consult the information about current and desired results that are based on the needs assessment).
7. Schedule a time for the focus group when the highest-priority participants are all available. Verify that you have both a focus group facilitator and a person to take notes during the meeting, that both are available at the scheduled time, and that both understand what is to be accomplished through the focus group. Arrange for an audio recorder so that the facilitator and note taker can verify information from the discussion when later preparing final notes or a report.
8. Implement the focus group session. The facilitator should remind participants to observe confidentiality of information shared. Allow the facilitator to manage the focus group process. If you serve as note taker for the focus group, avoid being tempted to interrupt the group. You are simply there to record data and to observe the focus group.

9. Immediately after the focus group has ended, the facilitator and note taker should verify that all of the essential information from the group has been captured in a written document.

10. If appropriate, run several focus groups. Doing so ensures that you gather enough information for the needs assessment.

Tips for Success

- Have a clear and specific goal for the focus group (in other words, have and maintain a clear focal point rather than an open conversation).
- Engage a facilitator who is experienced in managing focus groups. Focus groups are not as easy to facilitate as you might expect.
- Create a survey to be given out to participants so you can capture information that may not be discussed in the focus group because of time limitations.
- Carefully present each of your questions to the group, and allow the group members a couple of minutes to think about the question and to record their answers.
- Complete a test run of the focus group so you can identify potential problems, changes to questions, or additional materials that should be available to participants.
- After a question has been answered and before moving to the next question, verbally report back a summary of what you heard. This step confirms for the group members that they communicated what they intended to, and it allows them to make any suggestions for adjustments in the event that their thoughts were not accurately represented.
- Don’t be afraid to ask participants to leave if they are not willing to let others in the focus group participate. After all, the goal of the focus group is to gain multiple perspectives on the issues.
- If you are going to record (by video or audio) the focus group, then be sure to get the consent of all participants. Communicate to the group members what will be done with the video or audio recording of the session (for example, who will listen to it, how it will be stored, how long it will be stored, and so on). Such issues have consequences for how open the group members will feel about sharing their true opinions rather than those that they think you (or the organization) will want to hear.
- Write down any observations that you made during the focus group. For example, note if the audio or video equipment failed, if something unexpected took place, and so on. Such notes may help elucidate comments when you analyse the data that you gathered through the focus group.
- Plan for the focus group to take between two to three hours.

MATRIX RANKING/SCORING TECHNIQUE

Matrix Scoring/Matrix Ranking:

Matrix scoring/ranking is a preferences analysis technique used for comparing different elements against a range of criteria. While simple ranking can be used as an indicator, more complex matrix and scoring techniques enables a criteria based indepth analysis.

Applications

Matrices have been applied as part of PRA within almost all contexts. The aims of ranking, scoring, and creating matrices are to discover individuals or groups relative prioritization of components of a single issue. For example, matrices allow you to assess various institutions, schemes and provisions on different parameters, in relative as well as absolute terms. This tool can be used to discuss the following issues:

- Credit, preference for sources, access, problems, preference for use
- Income generation, preference for activity, problems
- Project preferences, priorities,interventions
- Institutions, service provision
- Health facilities, food and nutrition, diseases, symptoms
- Livestock, preferences, fodder types, species (for milk, etc.), diseases
- Agriculture, soil types, production problems, species, varieties, trial performances, pest damage, etc.

Process

The suggested steps in the process of matrix scoring/ranking are as follows:

- Identify the topic you want to discuss. Also identify the individuals or group with whom you would like to do the matrix, and clearly explain the purpose of the exercise.
- Initiate a discussion on the topic.
- The next step is to generate criteria for assessment. If a large number of criteria come up, discuss them with the participants and decide upon a few important ones. Ensure that the criteria are all of the same type (either all are positive or all are negative). The use of positive and negative criteria in the same exercise can be confusing.
- Draw up a matrix with the items/options left to right and the criteria top to bottom.Keep in mind that the comparisons are made criterion-wise and not item-wise. Then, ensure that each criterion chosen has been ranked or scored against all of the items. Repeat until all of the criteria have been ranked/ scored in this way, and properly recorded.

Ranking Method

The basic technique is ranking, where elements are placed in order of preference, by writing, drawing or moving cards representing individual elements. Preferences from 1 to x can be discussed in this way:

- Take up a criterion and ask the participants to rank or score the objects on the basis of that criterion. Questions which can help ranking could include:

- Which is the best?
- Which is next best?
- Which is worst?
- Of the remaining ones, which is better?

- Record the rankings directly onto the matrix. You can also use a card sorting method instead of this approach, particularly when you have a large number of options.

Scoring Method

- You can opt for fixed scoring on a 1 to 10 scale. Take up a criterion and ask the participants to give scores to each of the items in such a way that the items scoring high for that particular criterion get high scores and others get low scores depending on the magnitude in the range 10 (highest) and 1 (lowest). Record the scores in the relevant cells using flexible material like seeds, pebbles, etc.
- After scores are given for all the objects on one criterion, move to the next criteria and continue on till all are covered.
- Listen carefully to the discussions that the participants engage in while deciding on the scores/ ranks.
- Request the participants to reflect upon their findings.

Notes on the process:

'Overall' Criterion - Some facilitators have a tendency to add up all the scores for each object across all criteria to arrive at an overall picture. This is wrong because it implies that all criteria have equal weight for the participants. If you want to know how the matrix items are rated as a whole, a better option is to add another 'overall' criterion and to get the participants to rank/score each item.

People's Criteria - There is a temptation among the facilitators to determine the criteria for the matrix method themselves, especially when the research or project demands information on certain pre-fixed criteria. At times, the local participants may not come up with many criteria. They may be interested in a few criteria only while you may have a number in mind. However, it is important and necessary to use the criteria of the people and not yours if you want to capture their own reality.

Arriving at the Criteria - You can arrive at the criteria in different ways. One way is to go through a quick pair-wise ranking. As the participants tell you the preference for one over the other, ask them the reasons for this. Go over to the next pair, ask for their preferences, and ask for the reasons for their preferences. The reasons are nothing but the criteria. Identify as many criteria as possible. If a very large number of criteria are generated, facilitate prioritization by the participants. Take up only the most relevant criteria for matrix ranking/scoring. Another way of arriving at the criteria is to ask the participants themselves to list the points on which they would like to compare and assess the items. A discussion on this can help generate criteria. If a large number of criteria are generated, ask the participants to prioritize and select the most relevant ones.

Analysis and Reflection - Matrix ranking and scoring is much more than just the output. A large amount of information can be lost if one does not record the points discussed by the participants when selecting and describing each criteria. The facilitator should encourage the people to give a detailed presentation of their findings. Do not hesitate to ask questions at any point in time to make sure that you fully understand the information provided by the people.

Advantages and Limits

Matrices have been used at all stages in the project cycle, from appraisal, as a planning tool, and for evaluation, and is one of the most versatile methods in PRA. The subject matter does not restrict the use of matrices, and criteria are fully flexible, depending on the context and the participants.

Good facilitation is critical to the success of this exercise, and there are still a number of worrying cases where facilitators appear to have pushed their own criteria onto villagers or where information from semi-structured interviews is taken away and drawn up into matrix after the event, with no feedback.

Example of Matrix Ranking

Preference Ranking of Income-Generating Activities in Kerala

IGA / Criteria	Vegetable cultivation	Pickle Making	Leaf Plate	Seedling Nursery	Dairy	Poultry	Mushroom cultivation
Time Consumption	●●●●●	●●●	●●●	●●	●●●	●●●	●●
Profits	●●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●	●●
Labour	●●●●	●●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●	●●●	●●
Loan	●●●	●●	●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●
Hardwork	●●●●	●●●	●●●	●●●●	●●●●	●●●	●●

Check list:

1. Secondary data on the LSG updated …Yes/No
2. Secondary data on the LSG analysed…Yes/No
3. Previously rejected service delivery projects of LSG analysed…Yes/No
4. Vikasanarekha of LSG examined…Yes/No
5. Key informants identified…Yes/No

6. Key informants rating completed…Yes/No
7. Transect walks conducted…Yes/No
8. FGDs conducted in at least three locations of the LSG…Yes/No
9. Matrix ranking of prioritised needs done…Yes/No
10. Expert facilitator involved…Yes/No
11. FGDParticipants' lists with contact numbers attached…Yes/No
12. Note takers'observations and work sheets attached…Yes/No
13. Audio recordings attached…Yes/No
14. Video recordings/visual proofs attached…Yes/No
15. Needs assessment/ prioritised projects provisionally approved by the LSG…Yes/No