Community Assessment

The purpose of conducting a community assessment is to create an information foundation for further planning and action. As written upon the tombstone, any analysis and interpretation is relevant only when it becomes useful in making decisions or taking action. Community assessment can occur whenever people need information. Community members may want to collect information before developing goals, or after goals and issues have been identified, or at several points in the process. A variety of tools make assessment a useful exercise as community groups work through visioning, planning and implementation.

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

From a tombstone in
Highgate Cemetery, London

While working through this chapter, the *Vision to Action* steering committee or a project team will:

- Specify information to gather for further action or decision making.
- Discover existing information that is ready to use.
- Set a schedule for completing the community assessment.
- Identify and confirm a person to manage the community assessment process.
- Identify and confirm an organization to host the community assessment process.
- Review various assessment strategies.

Introduction

A community assessment can create a sense of where a community belongs, why it exists, where it has strength, where weaknesses lie, and what opportunities are available. The purpose of conducting a community assessment is to create a foundation for planning and action, or to broaden participation in the development of a community vision. In short, communities benefit from knowing more about themselves when they are working on projects or making decisions.

Communities want to define themselves by understanding better the characteristics of residents; the types of organizations that are active; the values, beliefs and goals residents share; concerns and problems which should be addressed; how the community compares with other communities; and what is unique about the community. An assessment of a community to address these issues may be approached from many perspectives.

This chapter of *Vision to Action* provides information about community assessments using two types of information-gathering strategies that are often used in tandem. Information can come from existing or secondary data about the community, or primary data gathered expressly for a particular project.

Sources of existing or secondary data will be suggested, and some strategies for collecting primary data will be explored. Usually, communities use existing data along with some data collected expressly for a project or a decision. Some communities choose to involve an expert—someone who can serve as an objective outsider to ensure neutrality in the design of assessment projects or in the collection of data. In most areas expert assistance is available through the Extension Service, a regional planning office, a Resource Conservation and Development office, a USDA Rural Development office, city staff or county staff.

In some communities, the *Vision to Action* steering committee and project teams have skipped the assessment phase and begun working on issues identified as top priorities. These groups often discover that they need the information from a community profile or assessment as they create an action plan to achieve the vision.

Information from a community assessment can be useful at several points in the visioning, planning and implementation process. Some community groups begin with a survey to identify important issues, collect data about those issues or the community to use in developing a plan, conduct focus groups to get feedback about the plan, and then begin implementation. Other groups know which issues are priority areas and begin working on those issues immediately. They may return to complete an assessment when they need more information in the planning or implementation phase.

Information from an assessment of a community is almost always interesting to community groups and residents, especially those involved in making decisions about the community. Therefore, a report to describe the issues and the findings of the assessment has lasting value.

Traditionally, community assessments were focused on the needs, problems or shortcomings of communities. Today, however, many communities are also working to identify assets, capacities or strengths within the community. The reasons for widening the focus to include the positive and the negative are many, including a new energy and drive for change and action which is more often the result of a focus on assets.

In many rural communities and urban neighborhoods, opportunities for change and improvement arise from a positive look at what can be done with current resources. Resources might include the skills, talents, time and ability of residents; a history of community that binds people to a special place; organizations that are rooted in and committed to the community; and strong networks of diverse people who share a common goal of investing in their community.

Considering assets in a community assessment is often a matter of broadening the perspective. For example, community leaders might worry about providing activities for young people to keep them out of trouble because they have nothing to do. From a *needs* perspective, the situation might be described as "what should we do to keep kids out of trouble?" From an *assets* perspective, young people should be viewed as an untapped resource and invited into community planning and community decision making to offer their views and contribute their energy. The extra time they have is viewed as an asset rather than an opportunity to cause trouble. In effective, cohesive communities, leaders find ways for all residents, including youth, to contribute.

Important decisions must be addressed in planning an assessment, including:

- What will the community learn from the assessment and how will the information be used?
- How will this information serve the *Vision to Action* planning effort?
- Is there existing information ready to use? Check with people who use information or know about the community (e.g., local planners, the health department, the librarian, the mayor, the town historian and the town clerk). Information that has been collected for one purpose may serve very well in the community assessment. At the very least, others in the community who might be willing to work on the current project will be identified.
- Who will plan and conduct the assessment—outside experts or inside talent?
- Who will take responsibility to manage the process? (Note that taking responsibility includes the responsibility to delegate.)

- Is there an organization to host the process, provide resources and lend credibility in the community? This might be an existing organization, the *Vision to Action* steering committee, or a committee created to host and manage the community assessment. Chambers of Commerce or economic development offices are sometimes identified as hosts.
- How will the activity be funded? In what form will resources be needed (e.g., will the assessment require time, dollars, office staff, postage, telephones, volunteers or credibility)?
- Will the assessment include a profile of the community using existing data or primary data? Could existing data be used in addition to primary data?
- What will the report look like?
- How will information be shared with community residents (e.g., town meetings, printed report available for pick-up, newspaper articles, direct mail to all residents, information on the community web site, local radio talk show, church bulletins, newsletters from community organizations, posters in public place)?

Another important decision that must be addressed is whether or not to complete the community assessment with volunteers or by hiring an expert. Following is some information on both options.

<u>Volunteers</u>

An advantage to having volunteers complete a community assessment is that control remains within the community. When local residents plan the community assessment they can shape the report to fit local information needs, and create a format that will be easy to share in the community. In completing the community assessment, local residents will learn firsthand about their community. When they attend meetings they will know something about the town, with the data and facts to support their opinions. When local residents think about data long enough to figure out a plan to collect it, they gain a better understanding of how that information can be used to make decisions. Decisions are grounded in a common set of assumptions about the facts. Working together to collect information binds a group around a common experience.

A disadvantage to having volunteers complete a community assessment is that data collection is difficult. It takes time and additional resources.

1. There is no perfect information package. Errors abound. There is the risk of collecting information that is not relevant to the decisions at hand, or is simply outdated or inaccurate. To find accurate and relevant data, the investigator must know of good sources, and this know-how represents a large investment of time and effort (often more than what can be expected of a local volunteer working in his or her spare time).

2. A local resident's proximity to the community puts blinders on his or her ability to see the community objectively, and the assessment process may reflect existing assumptions or perceptions. Completing a community assessment may create goodwill, help local residents build their skills, and generate enthusiasm toward community action. At the same time, local participation can be a liability. Local personalities can taint the information generated by the community assessment if the results of the assessment are closely associated with people (and their history or reputation in the community). An outsider can provide a fresh look, and a perspective gained from experience in other communities.

3. The ability to analyze the data may not reside locally. Analyzing data requires technical skill that is usually available at a university, community college, regional planning council, city planning office, or possibly the health department. Check references and request work samples if you are thinking of contracting for data entry and analysis. Specify the information to be included in the assessment and analysis, and think ahead about where the data should be stored and how it can continue to be accessible.

4. Community assessments take unexpected twists and turns—and usually require more time than is anticipated in planning and in sharing information. For example, a volunteer's resulting expertise in community conditions will make them popular with the local media. They may be answering questions for local reporters or appearing on local radio talk shows.

Experts

The advantage to hiring an expert is gaining from the experience of others. The quick and painless way to conduct a community assessment is to let someone else do it. The community buys the time and expertise of someone who can quickly collect information and who may attract local attention to the activity. An external expert will be perceived as objective, have no ax to grind, and no previous involvement with local issues. The product of the community assessment may be more generic, may have more application and recognition around the region, and thus may be useful in a context other than the local planning and action process.

A disadvantage to hiring an expert is that it is very expensive. Hiring an expert can quickly gobble up resources that could be invested locally. When local people develop skills, they continue to serve as a resource to the community. When the community hires an expert, he or she will come and go according to the contract. The expert may limit the community's use of the report and/or the data. The expert's detachment from the community may also engender less concern for the questions and less passion for solutions.

Do it Yourself with Help from an Expert

An advantage to using local resources with help from an expert is that costs can be cut without losing relevance and precision. Using a combination of external experts and local teams to conduct community assessments can cut costs, steer the community toward reliable sources, provide an objective external perspective, and allow for local residents to learn skills which will be useful in updating or supplementing the community assessment. If an expert guides the process, community members must make a strong commitment to keep up. This is often the model when communities work with Extension educators; expertise is contributed as community members develop skills. Community members mostly shoulder responsibility for conducting the assessment and sharing the resulting information, with guidance from someone who has experience.

A disadvantage to using a combination of external experts and local teams is that it gets complicated. Logistics in managing data collection from a variety of sources and methods can be time consuming and frustrating. Data gathering and reporting can become fragmented and difficult to incorporate into either vision development or action planning. When hiring an expert to work with community volunteers, a clear and detailed schedule is critical to completing the assessment. Since Extension educators have conducted community assessments previously, they often have a schedule and format to guide the process.

Using Existing Data

Creating a Community Profile

Numbers, and changes in numbers, describe a community and can indicate trends over time. Vital statistics are compiled from local, state and national records of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, and sometimes health. Using local statistics might identify factors affecting changes in population, which are described in the census. For example, an increase in population may be due to natural increases (births), or due to people moving into the community.

These records can be used to determine whether there has been a change in the number of households or in household composition. As a population ages, for example, households may be made up of older, single adults, rather than young adults and children. Census and vital statistics can be used to form a detailed description of residents according to such characteristics as ethnic background, age, gender, marital status, income and education. Use this information to make comparisons with other communities undergoing similar patterns of growth. If, for example, household income appears to be lower than it is in neighboring communities, what might be the reason for that? Maybe households in the study community are predominantly single retired persons living on fixed incomes, or maybe the major employer in the area offers low wages to workers.

Selected indicators that provide a profile of the community are listed below. There are no magic numbers to explain entirely the changes that may be taking place in a community, or the composition of a community. The numbers collected will identify areas where more can be learned.

Community Profile Listing Selected Indicators

Indicators include:
- Total population for the community and the region or state.
- Population change in the last decade (percent and absolute numbers).
- Age/sex pyramid.
- Changes in the age block (use another pyramid to see change).
- Ethnicity (major languages).
- Per capita income.
- Change in per capita income.
- Household income.
- Change in household income.
- Average rent.
- Value of housing units sold.
- Median cost of housing units.
- Level of educational attainment.
- Occupations of residents.
- Employment in the community.

Sources include:
- U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau: http://www.census.gov/.
- Data Center Program: (301) 457-1305. (Includes contact information for the State Data Centers, Business and Industry Data Centers, and Census Information Centers.)
- Iowa State University: http://www.profiles.iastate.edu/. (At this site you can see economic profiles by county or by state for the Midwest.)
- County and City Data Book and U.S. Statistical Abstract. (Hard copy is in local libraries and government repositories. Also available on the World Wide Web at the U.S. Census Bureau.)
- Local health departments keep statistics including births, deaths, marriages and divorces.

Sample Population Pyramid

The population pyramid is a useful tool to create a picture of the community or county population. Use information from the census bureau or the state data center to plot the number of persons by gender and by age group. Population pyramids represent the age distributions, grouped by gender, of the living population.

Each character in the chart below represents 0.5 percent of the population. The intervals correspond to the points—five years, 10 years, and so on up to 100, by five-year increments. Individuals one year old and older are represented by F (females) or by M (males). Children less than one year old are represented by lower-case letters, f (for females) and m (for males), at the outer edge of the 5-and under line.

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                                   Years of Age
                                       100
                                        95
                MALE                    90                 FEMALE
                                        85
                                        80
                                        75   F
                                 M      70   FF
                                MM      65   FFF
                               MMM      60   FFFF
                              MMMM      55   FFFFFF
                           MMMMMMM      50   FFFFFFFF
                          MMMMMMMM      45   FFFFFFFFFF
                        MMMMMMMMMM      40   FFFFFFFFFFF
                     MMMMMMMMMMMMM      35   FFFFFFFFFFFFF
                    MMMMMMMMMMMMMM      30   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
                MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM      25   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
            MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM      20   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
         MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM      15   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
      MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM      10   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFF
   mmmmmMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM       5   FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFfffff
--+---------+---------+---------+-------+---------+---------+---------+-
 15%       10%        5%        0%      0%        5%       10%       15%
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The pyramid above shows a growing population, with many persons at younger levels and fewer people of either gender in the older age brackets. For some communities, such as retirement communities, the pyramid is turned upside-down, with very few characters representing people in the younger age brackets and more and more in the upper age brackets. To create such pyramids, use spreadsheet software and the histogram option. It's useful to create pyramids for a community over time, to see how the population is changing. In many rural communities, the population is aging and their pyramids are top-heavy. For more information on creating and analyzing population pyramids, go to the Population Reference Bureau web site at www.prb.org.

Collecting Data from Community Residents

Collecting information directly from community residents is useful when the steering committee needs to know how people think, and how many community residents hold which views. Community assessments can also be used to identify the strengths and resources of community residents in an effort to focus on what they can contribute to a project and what they want to accomplish. Community assessments may collect information that is specific to a clearly defined issue, or the assessment may be general. (For example, the survey questionnaire could ask specifically about support for development of a new park downtown. Or the survey could ask generally about attitudes toward funding new development projects such as parks.) Various strategies to collect and analyze information from community residents are available. Several are listed below.

<u>Conducting a Community Survey</u>

When citizen groups want to take action, influence policy, list their strengths and assets, change things around or shake things up, community surveys are an effective way to find out what people are thinking and how they feel. Surveys allow citizen groups or a sponsoring agency to:

- Gather information on resident attitudes and opinions regarding precisely defined issues, problems or opportunities.
- Determine how residents rank issues, problems and opportunities in order of importance and urgency.
- Give citizens a voice in determining policy, goals and priorities.
- Determine citizen support for initiatives.
- Evaluate existing programs and policies.
- End speculation about what people are thinking or what people really want.

The survey process typically requires the following steps:

1. Form a steering committee to define a limited number of issues and manage the survey process.
2. With information from community members, list no more than five important issues around which the survey will gather information. It may be more useful to address only those issues over which changes can be made. For example, one area of emphasis may be to increase retail activity in the downtown. With that goal in mind, use the survey to identify which features or assets might be most attractive to local residents. For example, if there was a play area downtown, would parents leave their children there to play while they shopped? Issues that cannot be controlled, such as agricultural commodity prices, are not suitable topics for a survey. Important as these topics are, more information about how people feel will not enable better decisions to be made, nor affect economic conditions.

3. With a few issue areas identified, check to see if those people who have an interest in the topic are involved—these are the stakeholders. These are the people who are necessary to the implementation of any changes made after the survey has been completed, or the people who can stop those changes. Stakeholders must be aware of the plan to conduct a survey and must be invited to participate in the selection of questions.
4. List the population groups to survey and design the survey sample.
5. Select questions for the survey instrument. The University of Illinois has a bank of questions available for use. See http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~lced/.
6. Create a final draft of the questionnaire. Test it with someone unfamiliar with the process to identify any confusing instructions or questions. Revise the draft as necessary, then print as many copies as needed for the first round and half again as many for people who lose the first copy and need another.
7. Organize for data collection. Several options are available, including face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, a mailed questionnaire, and a hand-delivered questionnaire. Generally time must be allowed to distribute the questionnaire, complete the interviews or fill out the questionnaire, pick up the completed questionnaires, get second copies to people who have lost the first copy, and pursue stray uncompleted copies until the response rate goal has been reached.
8. Enter data from the questionnaires and conduct analysis.
9. Report findings and recommendations.

This is a deceptively simple list of activities required to complete a survey. More information is available online from the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development at the University of Illinois (http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~lced/).

Completing a Survey—What's the Best Method?

There are several good methods to distribute and complete survey questionnaires. The best choice depends upon the community's objectives and constraints. A short description of the most popular methods can be found in the table on page 67.

Conducting Focus Groups

Focus groups are labeled appropriately—a group of people, specifically and purposely selected, to engage in discussion around a focal point. The purpose of the discussion is likewise clearly defined, although purposes from group to group vary considerably. All focus groups, however, are designed to collect qualitative data. Groups formed to resolve conflicts, make decisions or solve problems are not focus groups.

The following four characteristics distinguish the focus group process from other information-gathering procedures.

1. The interview engages a number of people simultaneously. A distinguishing mark of the focus group process is that a number of people participate in the question-and-answer discussion together.
2. Respondents interact during the interview. Respondents are encouraged to listen to one another and interact with one another as they respond to questions and to each other.
3. A skilled moderator guides the interview. The moderator's role is critical, since he or she alone has questions for the group, and guides the discussion with the research objectives in mind. While the group is not limited in its responses regarding the topic, the moderator works to keep the group on target with comments relevant to the question at hand.
4. A discussion outline guides the process. While many information-gathering processes use a formal, close-ended survey instrument, the focus group moderator uses a general outline, with a few open-ended questions or statements to guide the group's discussion.

Method	Cost	Time Required	Response Rate
Face-to-Face Interview	Very expensive, unless volunteers conduct the interviews.	Allow 90 minutes per completed 60-minute questionnaire.	Usually more than 70 percent.
Hand-delivered Surveys	Less expensive if volunteers deliver and retrieve questionnaires.	Allow several weeks for delivery, responding, pick-up and retrieval, and follow-up calls with replacement questionnaires.	Usually very high response rate.
Mailed Surveys	Inexpensive--pay for postage to send and return.	Allow several weeks for mailing, responding, return mailing and follow-up mailings.	Low--usually 30 percent to 50 percent with one mailing.
Telephone Interviews	Less expensive than face-to-face, but more expensive than mailing a survey.	If you use a bank of callers, the survey can be completed very quickly.	Very good response rate since it is inexpensive to go to alternate households.

The focus group process was developed in part to improve upon the limitations of survey methods, by offering respondents few prompts and unlimited options for answers. Comparing the focus group process with surveying yields the most useful components of each, as depicted in the table below.

Characteristic	**Survey**	**Focus Group**
Size of Sample	Size increases strength of results. Repeated, high incidence outcomes strengthen results.	Size must be limited per group, and there are few advantages to finding repetitive information.
Range of responses	Limted to responses suggested on survey form, with few options for open-ended responses.	No limitations on responses (with respect for subject of question, however).
Depth of information	Shallow, but with implications for population.	Rich, but without predictive power.
Use of information	Predict trends and numbers.	Create lists of choices, possible outcomes, preferences, etc.
Research time	Requires more time from other participants (distributing and collecting surveys, data entry).	Requires more time from research principals to create questions and summarize results.
Research questions	"What?" and "How many?"	"How?" and "Why?"
Research Results	Quantitative.	Qualitative.

While information from a focus group does not forecast opinions or attitudes held by a larger group, the information can be used to design surveys, or develop expectations about the range and type of responses that might be found in the larger population. The focus group setting allows respondents to qualify their responses to questions; provide details that go beyond the superficial, structured responses of a questionnaire; and introduce contingencies and connections that the researcher may not otherwise include. A focus group allows the respondents to explore more fully the reasons why they hold certain opinions, or why they make the decision that they do.

Focus groups are useful before and after a survey. Before the survey, a focus group might help the survey organizers identify appropriate questions and anticipate responses. After a survey, a focus group can provide depth and insight into the numbers generated by the survey. The depth and scope of information collected using various methods can be visualized along the continuum on page 69.

The focus group process depends on some similarity among group members, and therefore participants are selected according to clearly defined criteria. Consumer marketing researchers may select focus group participants from their target market, which could be defined by age, gender and income. Educators may select focus group participants from the audience they hope to attract to future programs, or from people who have attended a program and can evaluate the experience.

It is much easier to evaluate the findings from a focus group if its members are more alike than different. For example, there may be strong preferences for delivery methods of educational programming based on age and gender. These strong preferences will not be clearly identified if age and gender are mixed within groups.

Grouping by meaningful characteristics suggests that as many groups as characteristics should be formed and interviewed. If you need information from a variety of groups, organize focus groups by characteristics that will allow free and open discussion. When issues are heated, a group of like-minded people will speak freely and without argument, which allows you to fully explore their point of view. If you mix positions, the discussion may degrade into an argument from which you, as the moderator, will learn little about the issue. Better to host two or more focus groups to accommodate differing perspectives, with reports generated to reflect truly and sincerely the positions held.

Focus groups are most effective when six to 10 people participate. When fewer people are present, one or two people may dominate and the discussion does not expand as people react to and comment upon ideas and statements. When larger numbers participate, people listen to one or two initial points, then orient their comments around the few which have already been presented. Large group discussions become difficult to control, and there is a good chance that the group will run out of time before it addresses every question.

Questionnaire, Specific questions, choice of responses	Questionnaire, Open-ended questions.	Foucs Group, Specific questions.	Focus Group, Specific topic, open-ended quesions.	Focus Group, General topic, open-ended questions.
Researcher Directed				Respondent Directed

When six to 10 people are present, each person tends to participate and expects other to take turns contributing. There also seems to be less hesitation to suggest something that contradicts a point already made. When people discuss a topic of shared interest, they become excited, creative and expansive in their ideas. This synergism among group members is a valuable component of the focus group process.

Use the focus group method when:

- Creativity applied to a problem or situation is needed.
- The problem is complex or in the long term.
- There are many different stakeholders and/or perspectives.
- The environment is uncertain and it is necessary to break out of the rut to find answers.
- It is difficult to understand the issue or people's responses.
- It is necessary to get reactions or think about a particular response.
- Looking for feelings and perceptions that require explanations.

A focus group is useful when:

- Wanting to know in advance how people will react to programs, methods, policies, products or services.
- Identifying problems, constraints, costs or benefits; stimulating creative thinking about solutions, opportunities and linkages; or identifying potential outcomes.
- Setting priorities or narrowing a problem.
- Seeking richer, deeper information about issues that surfaced in a survey.
- Wanting to understand a different perspective (e.g., learning about teenagers' preferences for programs).
- Trying to attract a new target audience and wanting to know what is valued and why.
- Wanting to get reactions to an idea, method or project.

<u>Asset Mapping</u>

Communities and neighborhoods are collections of people and resources. The process of asset mapping identifies the abilities, talents, gifts, skills and capacities of residents, and helps residents apply those resources and capacities to community goals. An asset approach to community assessment sees the glass as half full rather than half empty. The process focuses on the resources which can be rallied for the community or the neighborhood rather than the community's short-comings and needs.

Assets are inventoried on three levels: the individual, the organization (e.g., clubs and churches) and the institution (e.g., schools, businesses and agencies). According to Kretzmann and McKnight, asset mapping is based on three characteristics:

1. The community development process begins with what is present in the community or neighborhood—the assets. The focus in on the capacities of residents and the associational and institutional strengths, not with what is wrong or what is missing or what is a problem.

2. The community development process is internal to begin with. Activity revolves around building an agenda and identifying skills in the community. The result is a clearly defined local agenda, involvement and investment by residents, creativity, hope, control and self-reliance.
3. An asset approach to community assessment is based on relationships because people must work with one another to define the approach and depend on one another to see it through.

For a complete description of asset mapping with charts, case studies and how-to information see Kretzmann and McKnight's book titled *Building Communities from the Inside Out.*

Using Key Informants to Provide Information

Key informants might include client groups, service providers, community leaders, elected officials, parents, youth or others who are in the know regarding the issue at hand. Key informants can provide information and/or provide links to others that are in the know. To identify key informants, it is useful to think of people in a community as being linked together, and focus on the nodes of communication and who might be at each node to observe.

Key informants might have a formal community role such as an elected official, a director of a government agency or the head of a corporation or institution (e.g., town clerk, member of the clergy, officer of the historical society, librarian, university president, firefighter). These positions provide access to an official information exchange.

Key informants might have a decision making role such as controlling community or private resources (e.g., business owners, school superintendent, bank officers, newspaper editors, members of local service groups that fund projects). People in these roles usually have multiple associations and memberships, and carry information and opinions from group to group in the community.

Finally, key informants might have an informal community role (e.g., neighborhood opinion leaders, bartenders, community stalwarts who have an unofficial leadership role). Each person can suggest another person who should be contacted so the key informant list snowballs with additional names.

Key informant interviews can provide the steering committee and project teams with insight as to how ideas might be accepted in the community, who to involve, resources that might be available, or others in the community who could participate. Write out the objectives of the interviews and how the information will be used. This will help describe intent when speaking with key informants. When the interviews are successful they provide an insider's view of events and may identify opportunities or obstacles for future projects. When many interviews are conducted, the picture becomes more detailed. Therefore, it is important to seek out key informants from the entire community that hold a range of perspectives.

To prepare for interviews with key informants, write out a statement about the information that is being sought and the project or organization being represented. For example:

> *"I'm working with the* Vision to Action *group and we're exploring the idea of hosting a festival next fall. Your name came up as someone who would know what happened last time we organized a community-wide event, and what we could do better if we were to do it again. Would you be willing to talk with me for 30 minutes about your experiences and your ideas? Are there others with whom I should be talking?"*

If the *Vision to Action* steering committee and project teams are diverse and well-connected to the community, the key informant process can be conducted by members themselves. The process almost always occurs informally anyway, so adding some structure will provide much information with very little additional effort. To formalize the key informant process, the *Vision to Action* committee should create a set of questions to address the issues at hand. As committee members meet with others in the community they can collect and record responses to the questions. These can be shared with the group. As always, the questions should solicit information relevant to the decisions at hand. This process will generate some interest in the *Vision to Action* process and interviewers should be prepared to share information about the larger *Vision to Action* community visioning and action planning effort.

<u>Nominal Group Technique</u>

The nominal group technique is useful when groups are struggling with issues that are critically important. In some cases, issues are so important that people can't seem to commit to any decisions. The nominal group technique allows several of these important issues to be sorted into priorities, gaining input from all participants without undue deliberation. Nominal group technique follows these seven steps:

1. The question (may be a ranking of issues) is put before the group verbally and in writing.
2. Working alone, each participant lists items to share with the entire group. Items are briefly described and specific. Allow five minutes.

3. Each group member takes a turn stating one item from his or her list. Items are recorded on newsprint and are numbered as they are presented. Members take turns in order until all items on each person's list are on the newsprint. Offering items in order ensures equal participation and encourages members to combine subsequent items with those already listed.
4. After all items are recorded, members may ask for clarification or additional information about any item. If an argument develops, the facilitator reminds the group that they need only remember each perspective. The group does not have to resolve any disputes or decide the fate of any items as a group.
5. Each person will vote for a limited number of items that he or she considers most important. Usually each person lists the five most important items on a slip of paper.
6. If the votes are scattered across many items, the group may return to step four for additional information.
7. The group identifies a limited number of high priority items and decides how to proceed.

Gaining Consensus

When groups agree to use consensus decision making they agree that each person's views will be addressed and each person's support of the final decision is mandatory. Note that this is a far cry from taking a vote and letting the majority win. Consensus decision making avoids the inevitable minority loses outcome of voting. The process of gaining consensus takes time, often generates creative solutions that were not part of anyone's agenda, and requires strong facilitation and leadership to guide the group. The benefits, however, are many. With the entire group supporting the decision, there will be no faltering steps during implementation.

Large Group or "Official" Gatherings

Community groups may gather information during large, open meetings in the community. The meeting may be called specifically to address the topic, or the information-gathering activity might be an additional agenda item at a general town meeting. A crucial aspect of an open meeting is structure—there must be enough structure to ensure that people have equal opportunity to speak and be heard, and not so much structure that participation is stymied.

The purpose of collecting information during large group meetings is usually to provide residents with descriptions of current activities and opportunities for participation, and to gather their thoughts and ideas regarding the project. Unless the large meeting has been designed to define and solve problems, the purpose should be limited to collecting information. When residents provide information, their views and opinions should be recorded without criticism or comment. Information gathered at a large group meeting usually does not reflect the views of the entire community, since only those who decided to attend the meeting are heard. This strategy must be used with other strategies to develop a complete picture of the community.

Visual Assessment

An easy way to conduct an assessment of the physical features of a community is the windshield survey conducted alone or in a group. Topics for assessment can be identified before embarking on the tour. (For a sample Community Assessment Guide, see the web site for the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development at the University of Illinois at www.ag.uiuc.edu/~lced/.) Items for assessment typically include:

- Approaches or entrances to the community. Is the community name clearly marked? Are entrances attractive? Are signs helpful and easy to find?
- Housing conditions, types and upkeep. Are houses neat and well-kept? Are neighborhoods appealing? Are sidewalks accessible? Are there choices of high-cost and low-cost housing? Is there housing for seniors?
- Schools. Are schools well-kept? Is there evidence that the community supports schools, and that schools involve the community?
- Churches. Are buildings well-kept? Are there choices of denomination? Are signs directing visitors to churches and services clear?
- Downtown. How many services and retail stores are available? Are buildings attractive? Accessible? Are store hours coordinated and are stores open evenings and weekends?
- Other retail. Where are other retail stores? Services? Grocery stores? Are they easy to find?
- Recreation. What is the quality and range of recreational opportunities?
- Tourism. Is the community capitalizing on tourism?
- Visitor and community information. Was it pleasant and easy to visit?
- Health care. What facilities are available?

A visual assessment might be completed using disposable cameras that provide fodder for discussion. Photographers might be sent out to take the best and worst in the community—some photos end up in both categories and point out potential attractions which now exist only as eyesores. If photographs will be used in a large group meeting, use color slide film instead and project the slides for the entire group. For a complete program on visual assessment between two communities that swap reports, see *Community Swap: Finding a Fresh Perspective on Your Community* published through University of Illinois Extension.

Rapid Rural Assessment

Rapid rural assessment or rapid appraisal is a procedure designed to get practical information quickly. To efficiently use time and money, rapid rural assessments intend to gather just enough information to make necessary recommendations and decisions. This procedure incorporates a wide variety of tools and techniques to gather information. Appraisal methods include collecting information from people in large groups and from individuals using mapping exercises, diagrams, ranking activities and interviews.

Rapid rural assessments use triangulation to avoid bias. Triangulation implies that the person gathering information will look at any situation from at least three different perspectives to avoid bias. Biased results are not an accurate reflection of reality, since the information is gathered from only one perspective that does not provide the complete picture. Information that is gathered only from men is gender biased. Information that is gathered only from adults is age biased. Information that is gathered only from people who are active in the community may be income biased, or biased against new residents who are not yet active in a community work. Information that is gathered from people who pick up and complete a survey may be biased toward politeness if people are afraid to complain, or biased toward negativity if only dissatisfied people have enough energy to complete the survey.

Triangulation is included in community assessment at three levels.

1. The community assessment team or *Vision to Action* steering committee or project teams are triangulated by including at least three people who have different perspectives or points of view (e.g., women/men, experts/lay persons, newcomers/old timers, youth/elders).
2. People and organizations providing information are triangulated when a wide range of people are interviewed and all information is verified by at last three different sources.
3. Methods are triangulated when information is gathered using several tools (e.g., interviews, surveys, historical accounts and maps).

Rapid rural assessments use the information gathering process and the reporting process to help residents contribute information to decision making and to better understand the issues, choices and concerns in the community.

Sharing Results

Sharing results from any assessment activity is critically important. The following questions might be useful in thinking through a strategy for sharing information:

- What information is useful to the audience? For example, elected officials might want a level of detail that the general public won't want. When writing an article for the newspaper, consider linking the project to current issues in the community so that the topic is timely and relevant.

- How should information be shared? Consider creating summaries for publications that are available widely, through a newspaper series or a newspaper insert; creating a presentation that steering committee members use at speaking engagements; volunteering for the local radio call-in talk show; creating articles for newsletters; making up posters to display in public places—anything that provides information about what was learned through the assessment and how that information will be used in decision making. Each person should have written "talking points" that accurately outline the most important messages.

- Who will answer questions? One person or organization needs to be available to answer questions. It's very helpful if an organization will host this information clearinghouse, so that someone is ready with answers or with the appropriate contact.

- What will be suggested as follow-up? Specific action steps, outlined by the steering committee, should be presented at every opportunity.

- Can something more be built from this effort? Once there is attention for the assessment information, use it to talk about follow-up. Suggest a process for next steps. Describe ways that people can become involved. Make it easy for people to step in a little bit and they might just find themselves fully immersed in a great project.

A written report should include:

- A one-page summary of the highlights (an executive summary, or "talking points").
- The purpose or objective of the report, and a call to action.
- Brief description of how the information was gathered, organized and analyzed. This description validates the collection and analysis.
- Summary information from data, along with interpretive comments.
- Recommendations, by issue area if appropriate.
- Acknowledgment of each person and/or organization that contributed to the process.
- How to get more information and how to become involved.

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