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Situation Analysis

The program development process in Extension is a multi-phase process that begins with developing linkages with the public. A key component of those linkages are County Extension Councils. One of the roles that Councils play is to help in gathering input regarding the program needs in the county. Even when there is a highly representative Council, a broad array of information to help complement local knowledge remains necessary. In order to do this, it is important to conduct a situation analysis.
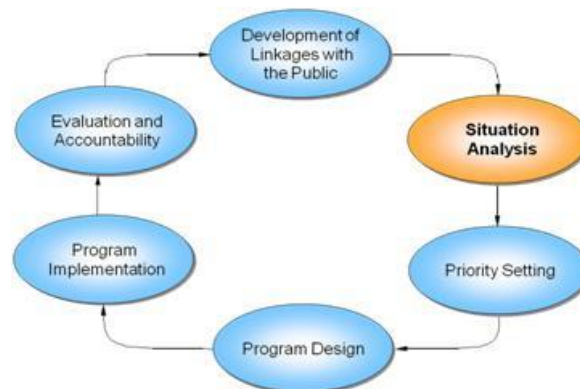
The process of conducting a situation analysis is designed to reveal "what is real" about a community. In other words, it will provide the types of information needed so that our decision making is based on evidence and not just impressions or stereotypes.

A situation analysis contains three key aspects. It is: (1) an examination of the community; (2) for the purpose of identifying issues, problems, or opportunities; (3) which might be addressed through Extension programming. The process should enhance dialogue within one's community and help in identifying issues and opportunities. It includes both collecting information and sharing that information. Done well, a good situation analysis can lead to more successful identification and addressing of issues in any given county.

There are three major sources of information that are useful when conducting a situation analysis. The first is current research and knowledge. The second is resident perspectives about issues, problems, and opportunities. The third type of information is existing data on a topic or issue.

The first step in doing a situation analysis is to meet with the County Extension Council to make plans for collecting information and data from these three sources. Both Council members and Extension staff can assist.
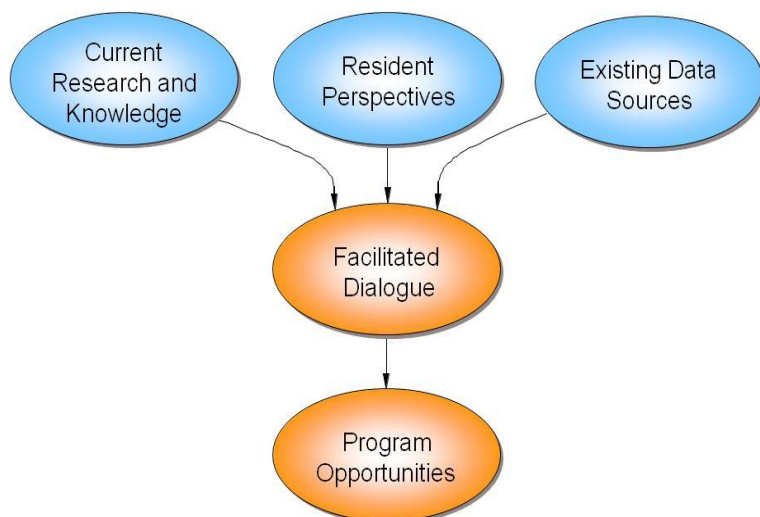
After everyone has collected their information, a second County Extension Council meeting should be held to review the data and discuss the implications of the findings. This discussion should produce a list of program opportunities where Extension could be involved.

(There are specific facilitation techniques that can be useful for generating a list of program opportunities. These can be found in the next publication in this series on *Priority Setting*.)

Agriculture and Natural Resources • Family and Consumer Sciences • 4-H Youth Development • Community and Economic Development

Current Research and Knowledge

Current research and knowledge means finding and understanding what research has shown on a particular issue. Throughout its history, Cooperative Extension has been an important conduit for bringing research-based knowledge to local communities. For example, Extension has helped farmers learn about research that improves profits or yields. Extension has also played a leading role in helping citizens consume diets which reflect research-based dietary guidelines.

Since research is always changing, making new discoveries, or asking new questions, it is important to be aware of changes in that knowledge. There could be new findings that could inform local decisions about important issues and program areas. University-based Extension specialists and faculty may periodically provide county Extension staff with updates on research, legislation, and policies.

Understanding the current research and knowledge on an issue can also help in gaining a better understanding of any issues that community members identify as being important. Sharing this information with Council members can help identify if there are new issues that the county might consider pursuing.

Resident Perspectives

Current research and knowledge is only one type of information to use in a situation analysis. The County Extension Council should also engage in activities which help them understand resident perspectives about the challenges and opportunities facing the community. In other words, what do residents in the county see as the important issues facing the community?

While County Extension Councils are one place to gather this kind of information, it is important to look beyond them as well. Even when they are broadly representative, Councils cannot capture everyone's experience of living in the county. Residents have different vantage points, different perspectives, and different experiences. Gathering resident perspectives can also be a great way to reach out to new and underserved groups.

There are several different ways of reaching out and gathering resident perspectives. Regardless of which method (or methods) selected, some questions to consider could include:

- What are some of the positive characteristics of the county?
- What are some of the negative characteristics of the county?
- What do you see as the most pressing issues or challenges in the county?
- What resources or strengths does the county possess for addressing these issues or challenges?
- How can Extension help the county address the issues or challenges through educational programming?

Community Forums – Community forums are public meetings in which a large number of individuals share and discuss their perspectives on issues facing the community. While the primary purpose is to stimulate discussions that can identify the strengths and challenges in your county, they also create awareness of Cooperative Extension. Community forums can take different forms. For instance, you could discuss the questions listed above. These could also be used to review and discuss existing data that are collected in the next step. Another approach could be to provide an overview of current programming that is being implemented to address local needs.

Community forums are open to the public, but be sure to send special invitations to elected officials, agency representatives, and community leaders. While agents might want to facilitate the forum, it is important to remember that members of the County Extension Council can facilitate it as well. They could also help out by keeping notes on a flip chart so everyone can see them.

Focus Groups Interviews – If you want to target specific groups, focus group interviews can be a useful technique. These are structured discussions with a small group of eight to twelve individuals that are focused on a clearly defined topic. Members selected to participate typically share some common characteristic such as age or role in the community. The moderator is responsible for asking the questions and facilitating the resulting discussion. A second person typically takes notes or sometimes tape records the session for later coding and analysis. To learn how to conduct a focus group interview refer to "Using Focus Groups in Program Development and Evaluation" available at http://psd.ca.uky.edu/files/focus.pdf

Key Informant Interviews – Key informant interviews can be a useful way to gather information from specific individuals in your county and community. For example, an operator of a farm supply store might be able to provide important information on recent fertilizer sales. A school principal will have a good perspective when it comes to issues facing youth.

Once the key informants have been identified, it is important to determine ahead of time what questions to ask. Usually key informant interviews are done in person, so it's crucial to set an appointment/meeting time. Since everyone being interviewed is asked the same questions, these interviews can be conducted by either Extension staff or members of the County Extension Council.

Surveys – If you want to gather resident views from a large number of people in the county, a survey can be a cost-effective way of collecting that information. In general, community members are asked to respond to a set of questions about their community. Typically, printed questionnaires are mailed to community members, but they can also be shared in group settings or other venues such as printing them in a local newspaper. The goal is to get as many surveys completed by the largest possible number of people. In addition, some residents may prefer an online survey, so it may be helpful to provide an electronic format as well.

Questions on surveys can draw on the questions outlined above. They can also be either closed-ended or open-ended. Closed-ended questions are those where the person responding chooses from a list of possible responses. Open-ended questions are those where the person can write in their own response to the question. Some surveys also ask for a person's demographic information. Knowing this can help in understanding how different groups of individuals view a particular situation.

Media Scan – Scanning local news media can also provide information about issues in a given county. To be most effective, this should be a systematic review of sources like news articles and editorials. These could be in newspapers or on local radio or television and are often excellent sources of information that can reveal issues that residents are concerned about locally.

Existing Data

Data that have already been collected are called "secondary" or "existing" data. These data can be helpful in determining the extent of an issue in a county, whether it has been changing, or how the county compares to some other place. Existing data can also be used to see if local perceptions match the local reality.

Regardless of which data are used, it is imperative to remember that existing data are only a tool. They should not make the final decision for us. For instance, even though a number can help us understand how much of something there is, the individual still has to determine if that number is too high or too low. Other questions to ask can include: Is that number enough or is it too much? What does it mean if this number is growing or that one is declining? Because the answers vary, this is why it is important to engage local residents and County Council members in reviewing the data.

Existing secondary data can be obtained from a variety of sources. In Kentucky, two key sources are Cooperative Extension's Kentucky: By the Numbers and the Kentucky State Data Center. In addition, many public agencies and non-profit organizations can produce data related to their areas of interest.

With so many different websites providing access to a wide array of secondary data, here are a good few websites to help narrow the field:

U. S. Census Bureau Quick Facts
http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html

Kids Count
http://datacenter.kidscount.org/

Kentucky: By the Numbers
http://www2.ca.uky.edu/snarl/

Kentucky State Data Center
http://www.ksdc.louisville.edu/

FCS Building Strong Families Profiles
http://hes.uky.edu/StrongFamilies

County Economic Profiles at
http://cedik.ca.uky.edu/CountyDataProfiles

Cabinet for Economic Development
http://thinkkentucky.com/selectkentucky/

Kentucky Agricultural Statistics Service
http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Kentucky/index.php

With so much data online, it is increasingly important to be aware of the different sources. Remember, while using an online search engine might be quick, it might not provide the best data needed.

For more links and help with finding and using existing data, the Kentucky: By the Numbers program has many online resources such as the short publications called "Finding and Using Data on the Internet" and "What Counts? Measuring Jobs, Income, and Unemployment." Both of these are available at: Kentucky: By the Numbers website: http://www2.ca.uky.edu/snarl/

Although it can be tempting to only use secondary data that are online, one should never overlook local sources. Groups such as chambers of commerce, boards of education, county health departments, local libraries, police departments, and other local agencies can provide additional information useful in determining the local situation. Sometimes, these agencies may have already conducted their own situation analysis and are willing to share their findings. Council or community members may have access to data that Extension staff would have difficulty acquiring. Hence, the reason to engage in community dialogue.

A Final Word

When it comes to conducting a situation analysis, it is important to remember that agents are not to act alone. County Extension Council members can help in gathering the different kinds of information. They can help provide access to local data or local groups, construct or distribute a survey, facilitate a forum or help record the results from focus groups.

Engaging council members in the process not only shares the load, they also bring important insights, skills, and networks. When reviewing the information collected by doing a situation analysis, it is highly likely that different people will look at the same results and still interpret the results differently. Having good facilitation skills can help in examining the results and build consensus in identifying future programming.