

Getting to Know your Community and their Needs

What is in this guide?

This guide will show you how to carry out the needs assessments to make sure that the real needs of the community are addressed. It contains the following sections:

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1. Why “Needs Assessment?”

Needs assessment (NA) are carried out to make sure that the real needs of communities are addressed by development programmes and projects.

It involves research and systematic consultation with community stakeholders and project beneficiaries before the project is designed and implemented. NA helps to identify problems and needs and involves the people who are meant to benefit from the project in deciding on the project design. Potential problems can be identified early and a good NA will help to measure reactions, preferences and priorities before any final decisions are made.

NA must combine getting the facts as well as the opinions of a representative sample of beneficiaries and other stakeholders to ensure that their concerns are heard and incorporated into project and policy formulation. The main purposes of a NA are to:

- Provide decision-makers and communities with facts and data to help them make correct decisions;

- undertake systematic listening, which “gives voice” to poor and other hard-to-reach beneficiaries;
- obtain feedback on preferences and priorities; so that government can plan to use limited resources in the best possible way.

2. How can we assess the needs of the community?

All over the world there are many examples of development work done with no or poor needs assessments that lead to inappropriate projects. There are many different tools that can be used to assess needs. Community and development activists are well placed to help with needs assessments and to make sure that the voices of the poor and marginalised are heard. In this guide we will focus on tools that can be used by activists to assess needs.

Many development projects will employ a professional team of managers who will collect scientific data and use other methods to assess needs. Activists should operate in partnership with these initiatives and help to make needs assessments as realistic and accurate as possible by ensuring community participation.

Your needs assessment work is not meant to replace quantitative surveys and other traditional methods for data gathering; rather it complements these professional methods with practical and useful information on the perceptions of a community to inform Project Managers and policy makers.

Needs Assessment is done by investigation and evaluation that relies mainly on methods such as:

- **Research and data collection**

Information is collected about the facts that will influence decisions. For example if the project involves sanitation, facts will be collected about the number of people involved, the level of services that is affordable, the ongoing operational costs, the availability of water and sewage works, etc. Most of the research and data collection will be done by professionals like engineers and technical staff.

- **Structured surveys and interviewing, around key themes or topics**

A good way of measuring community opinion is to do a survey or interviews with lots of people. This can be done by a professional team or a team of volunteers, activists or ward committee members. We will learn how to do design and do a basic survey that will provide scientifically reliable results.

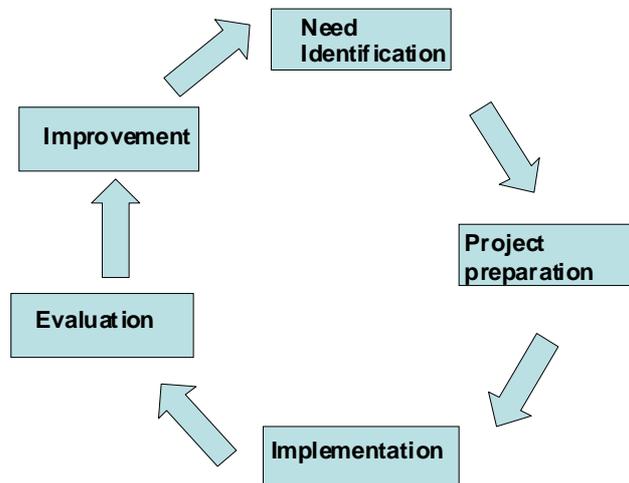
- **Focus group discussions or consultations with sectors of the community**

Sometimes it is best to have meetings with affected groups so that issues can be explained and discussed in detail. We will learn how to run a simple consultation meetings.

- **Participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) and observation**

Participatory appraisal is a set of tools that can be used to involve the community and get information from them. It is very useful in areas where much of the knowledge and facts you need are not written down anywhere. For example if you are doing a farming development project in a rural community you can use these tools to find out what farming already takes place, who owns and controls resources and what land is suitable for what kinds of farming. We will learn a set of easy to use PRA tools.

Needs assessments can be carried out before and during a project. Projects go through cycles, i.e.



In each of these phases different tools can be used to make sure the community is consulted and remains on board

NAs can be done by professionals and/or by activists. For big and expensive projects it is best to get a good mix of skills in a NA team so that everything from technical to community research can be done.

3. Steps in a Needs Assessment programme

Experience in many community development projects has shown that the following Needs Assessment steps are important to follow:

- **Familiarisation:** technical leaders are selected to guide the NA project. Important problem areas are identified and reviewed, using all available information.
- **Design of the NA Study:** A guide for structured interviews is developed by the leaders and specialists to cover key themes and issues. Target populations are identified, in the broad community. A representative sampling method is worked out. A research group and leader should also be appointed – and your role as the community volunteers should be clarified.
- **Selection and training of local interviewers:** the leadership group helps select and train local community men and women who are fluent in local language(s), good listeners, and skilled in listening and writing.
- **Implementation of the NA Study:** NA work commonly includes interviews, focus group discussions, PRA and data and institutional analysis (for example, of existing resources, obstacles, and public service or government agencies).

- **Preparation of the NA report:** The Needs Assessment report includes recommendations that incorporate assessment findings into project design or sector work. The NA report should be reviewed by the local community representatives to crosscheck for accuracy. It is important that you ensure that the NA report is accurate and endorsed by the community representatives.

4. Understanding your area and doing a community profile

Community organisers can only be successful if they understand the communities and the people they have to organise. You can only be effective if you go to the people you want to organise, learn from them, understand their conditions and work for change at a pace that they can accept.

You probably think that you know your area well and have many opinions about what people see as their problems and what their attitudes are. Remember that organisers and activists often see the world differently from ordinary people. It is very important that you do research to really find out what people see as their problems, how they see solutions and what their attitudes are to change.

4.1 Key things you should find out

There are many ways to do a community profile. It is best to write down everything you find out and to update it regularly – this should not just be a once-off assignment.

A good community profile will help you to make sure you address the correct issues in your area. Here is a broad list of the types of things you may want to know:

- The people in your ward and the problems they experience;
- The physical environment;
- Access to government services;
- Community life – what else is happening in the community.

Below there is more information about what you should find out. Use the forms at the end of this section to capture all the information.

The people in your ward and the problems they experience

Use meetings, interviews and official sources to find out as much as you can about:

- People's practical needs and problems – concentrate on issues like housing, water, electricity, roads, transport, health services, education, social grants, child care and facilities.
- Issues that worry or concern them – these could be things like crime, violence, youth and HIV/AIDS, etc.
- Facts and figures about age groups, gender, employment status and income.

The physical environment

Make a list of what exists and what the problems are. Look at things like:

- Types of housing;
- Basic services like water, sanitation and electricity;
- Schools;
- Roads;
- Health services : hospitals, clinics, ambulance;
- Fire fighting services;
- Police services;
- Postal and telecommunication services;
- Sport, parks and other recreational facilities;
- Municipal facilities (pay points and service centres);
- Shops, Markets and Banking Facilities;
- Factories and other places of employment;
- Places of Worship;
- Community Halls;
- Transport services.

Access to services

Find out things like:

- Do people have access to free basic water and electricity?
- Where can you apply for pensions and grants?
- Where is the nearest Home Affairs office?
- Where do you apply for a housing subsidy?
- How do you get on a waiting list for a house?

Community Life – What else is happening in the Community

Make a list of all the organisations you can think of. Ask any organisations you meet to give you contact details for others they know of. Use the form for task 4 to capture the details. Think of the following:

- Political Organisations
- School Governing Bodies
- Community Policing Forum
- Civic Organisations
- Religious organisations
- Youth organisations
- Women's organisations
- Business organisations – including taxi associations, hawkers organisations, etc.
- Burial societies, stokvels and other credit and saving organisations
- MP or MPL constituency offices
- Traditional leaders
- Traditional healers
- Sport and cultural clubs
- Shebeens and other social spots
- Gangs, crime, taxi rivalries and loan sharks

4.2 Example of a community profile

1. People

(Get estimates from council or clinic statistics)

How many people live in your area _____
How many of those are women/girls _____ men/boys _____
How many people are under 18 _____ over 65 _____
How many of over 65's are women _____ and men _____

2. Facilities

How many of the following are there and what are the main problems

	Number	Problems
Primary schools	_____	_____
High schools	_____	_____
Crèches	_____	_____
Clinics	_____	_____
Sport fields	_____	_____
Community halls	_____	_____

How far from where most people live are the nearest:

	Distance	Problems
Police station	_____	_____
Post office	_____	_____
Clinic	_____	_____
Hospital	_____	_____
Fire brigade	_____	_____
Shops	_____	_____
Bank	_____	_____
Public phone	_____	_____
Magistrate's court	_____	_____
Pension pay point	_____	_____
Other	_____	_____

3. Work

What % of adults are unemployed: men _____ women _____

What kind of work do most women do?

Write all the most common things, the problems there are and the estimated pay for that kind of job and how many women do that type of work. At the bottom of this section is an example of how to fill it in.

Type of work	Problems	Pay	How many
1_____	_____	_____	_____
2_____	_____	_____	_____
3_____	_____	_____	_____
4_____	_____	_____	_____
5_____	_____	_____	_____
EXAMPLE: Domestic worker	Bad pay, long hours, no benefits, own children, no buses after 5pm	R500 p/mth	30% one third

What kind of work do most men do?

Type of work	Problems	Pay	How many
1_____	_____	_____	_____
2_____	_____	_____	_____
3_____	_____	_____	_____
4_____	_____	_____	_____
5_____	_____	_____	_____

4. Water, sanitation and fuel

Where do households get water from - write all the different ways in different parts of your community and the problems:

Area	Water source	Problems
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

What kinds of toilets do most people use - write all the different kinds in different parts of your community and the problems:

Area	Toilet type	Problems
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

What do most people use for power and cooking?
 (for example: wood, electricity, paraffin, gas, coal, dung)

Area	Fuel type	Problems
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

5. Housing

What kind of houses do people live in? Write the different types in different parts of your community.

Area	Type of housing	Problems
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

6. Transport

What kind of public transport do most people use and what are the problems? (think about the different problems men and women may have)

Type of transport	Problems
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

7. Health, welfare, social and legal issues

What are the most common health problems for:

Girls under 16	_____	boys under 16	_____
Women over 65	_____	men over 65	_____
Other women	_____	other men	_____

What are the most common family problems?

What are the most common problems about crime and violence ?

NOTES

4.3 SECTORAL SHEET

Sector	Name	Key issues	+	Contact person Ph.number
Political				
Religious				
Schools				
Health/ Welfare				
Housing				
Business				
Sport				
Cultural				
Stokvels				
Other				

5. Where can you get the information?

Now that we have an understanding of what information you need to understand your area and its people, we will look at how you go about getting this information. You can get information from official sources, from NGOs and community organisations, through community consultation meetings, by doing structured interviews or through targeted “focus groups”. Here are some examples:

- Schools and Crèches can provide enrolment figures as well as gender breakdowns;
- Hospitals and clinics can provide details of admissions and details of the major health problems facing the community;
- The local Police Station can provide crime statistics;
- The Local Municipality can provide details on:
 - Registered voters from the voters roll
 - Plans to develop the area
 - Payment levels for services
 - Backlogs in the provision of services
- If the Municipality has updated its Integrated Development Plan (IDP) it may be able to provide fairly accurate details on population size, employment status and plans to develop the area.
- You can visit the website of the Municipal Demarcation Board (www.demarcation.org.za). There is an analysis of information from the last population census for each Local Municipal Area.
- Ward committees and community development workers (CDWs) should have done audits of what exist in the area and what problems are common.
- Consult with local non-governmental and government agencies for any recent studies conducted in the community you work in.
- Community meetings and research surveys can also be used to get information – we deal with them in the next sections.

5.1 Community Consultation Meetings

Community Consultation Meetings can be organised to hear the views of local people on a particular issue. For example, a meeting of the community could be called to discuss the proposed closure of a school. The meeting can hear the views of the community and work out plans to resolve the issue, together with the local MP/MPL, Councillor and education officials.

Advertise the meeting properly with posters or pamphlets and also use your networking sheet to invite specific organisations.

If you help to organise a mass meeting to consult people it is very important to hold the meeting in such a way that different opinions can come out and be debated by everyone. If there is no agreement and no clear way forward, it is always good to use one of the other ways of consulting people that reaches people in a more targeted way, e.g. Sector Profiles or Focus Groups (which are covered later in this section).

Here is an example of an agenda for a two-hour consultation meeting on what facilities residents want the municipality to prioritise in its next budget:

CONSULTATION MEETING	
1. Welcome and explanation of aims and process of meeting	<i>Chairperson</i>
2. Input on basic facts about the available budget and possible options for facilities	<i>Councillor</i>
3. Open discussion of people's views and proposals	
4. Break into small interest groups to discuss options and come up with proposals Groups could be: - youth - men - women - pensioners - business people <i>[if you want to be sure that women's concerns come out, you can sub-divide all the above groups into men and women]</i>	
5. Report back, discussion and voting (if needed)	

5.2 Direct Consultation - surveys

The best way of consulting the community is to go door-to-door and do proper survey where you ask everyone the same questions. Make sure that you speak to the women and not just to the men in the house. You can also send out questionnaires in area where the council has an address for every voter, or use places like clinics or rent offices to ask people questions. A referendum where everyone votes to make their views clear is another way of doing it.

Here are some tips for doing your own community opinion surveys:

Samples

It is quite simple to do your own survey. If you want the information to be valid, choosing a suitable sample is very important. Make sure of the following:

Your sample must be big enough to be “valid”. For example, if you are doing a community survey to find out what people see as the main problems in the area, your sample should be about 3% if the community has 10 000 or fewer people. When you deal with bigger communities your sample can be a small percentage. If your sample is too small, the results may not be reliable, and may be challenged by officials or by community leaders.

Your sample must be “representative”. Try to find out how many people live in the area in terms of the number of men and women, different age groups, different income groups, different educational level and different race / language / religious groups. This information you can get from the census results in your area. The municipality should be able to make it available to you. Once you know who lives in the area you must make sure your sample has the right percentage of each group so that it can be representative. For example, if 10% of the people in your area are unemployed black women between the ages of 20-30, 10% of your sample should be such women.

Your sample must be “random”. This means that you cannot choose which people you interview but you must use a system that leaves the choice to chance. For example, you can say we will stop at every tenth house in this area to interview a female and then go to the very next house to interview a male. Avoid interviewing people whom you know, just because it is more comfortable.

Questions in the Community Survey

Apart from the sample, the questions you ask are also very important. Try to do the following:

- Decide what you want to find out – do not be too ambitious and put too many questions in the survey.
- At the top or bottom of your questionnaire should be some questions about the person you are interviewing – like age, race, employment, gender – to help you analyse the answers of each target group. Most of these you can fill in without asking the person. Use a separate sheet [see below] to analyse your results.
- The questions must be very clear and simple – set your questions in such a way that the answer can be “yes”, “no” or “undecided”. You can also use questions that have numbers of multiple-choice options as answers.

Some examples follow:

1. “Do you think your ward councilor is doing a good job?”

YES ___ NO ___ UNDECIDED ___

2. Which of the issues below are the three most important for you for your municipality to deal with?

a. Crime _____ b. Dirty streets _____ c. Unemployment _____ d. Parks and facilities _____
e. Water _____ f. Electricity _____ g. Better roads _____ h. Other _____

3. Which of the following public transport system do you use most often?

Taxis _____ Small buses _____ Buses _____ Trains _____ Lift dub _____

Writing questions like this will make it much easier for you to work out the results since you can simply calculate how many people choose which answers. Do not ask open-ended questions like: "What do you think of your ward councillor?"

6. How to Analyse Survey Results

To work out your results make a sheet with tables on it for each question and just tick in the right column.

Here is an example for the questions we used above:

Interview Number	Question 1			Question 2 3 letter chosen most important								Question 3 type chosen				
	Yes	No	Undecided	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	Taxi	Small bus	Bus	Train	Lif Club
TOTALS																

If you fill in the answers from all questionnaires here, it is easy to add up the result.

You can also make a sheet for each target group – so for example, one for young women, who are unemployed, one for men over 30 who are employed, etc. Some people can be on more than one sheet. If you add up the totals for the sheets for that target group you will then get results that are specific to the target group. You can also do all this on a computer by using a programme like Microsoft Excel.

7. Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA)

Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) is a community survey methodology, or "tool" used by many international organisations like the World Bank, Action Aid, Ford Foundation, GTZ, SIDA, UNICEF, UNDP, to do a quick analysis of community problems and possible solutions. It has been developed specially to involve local people in needs analysis. PRA provides a number of practical tools and you can select those most practical for the project. These techniques include:

- structured interviews,
- focus group discussions,
- project mapping,
- preference ranking, and
- trend analysis

Participatory Rapid Appraisal is often used in response to the problems of "outsiders" (from other

countries or cultures) mis-communicating with local people about development work. In PRA, data collection and analysis are undertaken with local people, with outsiders facilitating rather than controlling. PRA is an approach for shared learning between local people and outsiders. PRA techniques are equally applicable in urban and rural settings and are not limited to assessment only.

The same PRA approach can be employed at every stage of the project cycle of planning, implementing, monitoring or evaluating a community development project.

7.1 Key Principles of Participatory Rapid Appraisal

- **Community Participation:** Local people's input into PRA activities is essential to its value as a research and planning method, and to ensure people's participation in development.
- **Teamwork:** The PRA draws data from informal interaction and brainstorming among those involved and it is best done by a team that includes local people with perspective and knowledge of the area's conditions, traditions and social structure. Other team members could be government officials, NGOs and Community Development Workers with a good mix of disciplinary backgrounds and experience. A well-balanced PRA team will represent the different socio-economic, cultural, gender and age groups.
- **Flexibility:** PRA does not provide a "one best way" blueprint for you to use every time. A combination of techniques may be used depending on things like the skill mix of the PRA team, the time and resources available and the topic and location of the project.
- **Valid and Reliable Information:** PRA needs accurate, good quality data. To ensure that information is valid and reliable, PRA teams should follow the rule that at least three sources must be consulted or techniques used, to investigate the same topics.
- **Sufficient information and Speed:** To be efficient in terms of both time and money, PRA work aims to gather just enough information to make the necessary recommendations and decisions. That is why it is called a "Rapid" Appraisal method: just enough information and community "buy-in", as quickly as possible.

7.2 PRA Tools for you to use

PRA is an exercise in community communication and transfer of knowledge between local people, development workers and professionals. Regardless of whether it is carried out as part of a project identification or appraisal, or as part of ongoing community development work, the "learning by doing" and teamwork spirit of PRA requires transparent procedures that are done as rapidly as possible. For that reason, a series of open community meetings (an initial open meeting, final meeting and follow up meeting) generally form the sequence of successful PRA activities.

The practical appraisal tools often used in PRA are:

- **Open Meetings:** to inform and consult the broad community.
- **Structured interviewing:** with local leaders and officials.
- **Focus group discussions:** with representatives of the community in various sectors (e.g. women, youth).

- **Preference ranking:** to seek agreement on priorities or make choices about resources.
- **Mapping and modelling:** of a project layout, so that people can visualise it easily.
- **Seasonal and historical diagramming:** of information, to define trends by season, or over a period of years.
- **“On the ground” walking:** to see the area together and discuss problems with affected people.
- **Gender analysis:** Explore differences and similarities between boys and girls, men and women's workloads in relation to various issues.
- **Institutional analysis:** To analyse people's perceptions of the importance, relevance and effectiveness of the various institutions working in an area and the contributions they make towards the welfare of this community.
- **Well-being / wealth ranking:** Community members identify well-being and wealth categories in a community. They also describe the wealth categories and give them their characteristics.
- **Flow chart:** There are a number of factors that influence situations in the community. Problems like hunger, poverty, farm yields or HIV/AIDS have their particular causes which are often inter-related and influence each other. A flow chart explores these inter relationships, to help everybody to understand the issues.
- **The “now” and “before” matrix:** PRA tool designed to generate people's perceptions of improvements or deterioration on one or other aspect of life: e.g. food security, morbidity rates, farm inputs, job creation, etc.

7.3 How to organise a PRA

A typical PRA activity involves a mixed team of people working for at least two or three weeks with a community, on workshop discussions, focus groups, information analyses and practical fieldwork. Several organisational aspects should be considered, when you are organising or helping a PRA project team:

- **Logistical arrangements:** should consider nearby accommodation, arrangements for lunch for fieldwork days, sufficient vehicles, portable computers, funds to purchase refreshments for community meetings during the PRA and supplies such as flip chart paper and pens.
- **Training of team members:** may be required, particularly if the PRA has the combined objective of training, in addition to data collection.
- **PRA results:** are influenced by the length of time allowed to conduct the exercise, scheduling and assignment of report writing, and careful analysis of all data, options, conclusions and recommendations.
- **Timing:** A PRA covering relatively few topics in a small area (perhaps two to four communities) should take between ten days and four weeks, but a PRA with a wider scope over a larger area can take several months. Allow five days for an introductory workshop if community training is involved.

- **Reports:** are best written immediately after the fieldwork period, based on notes from PRA team members. A preliminary report should be available within a week of the fieldwork and the Final Report should be made available to all participants and the local stakeholders or organisations that were involved. Maps, visual diagrams and other practical illustrations should be used, to achieve community understanding and participation in endorsing the plan or report – or to correct wrong information or assumptions.

7.4 Practical examples of PRA tools: how a community can actively participate in drawing up valuable appraisal information.

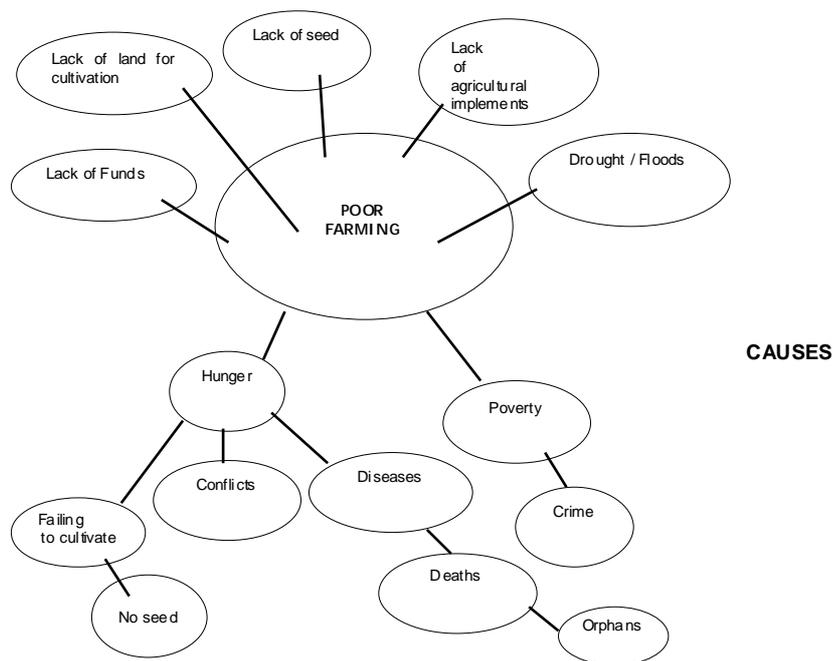
In the next few pages, we will give several real-life examples of PRA tools used in a rural development “Rapid Appraisal” exercise, to show how the community was involved in gathering and checking relevant data.

Visual 1: Seasonality of crop availability in the district

MONTH	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Maize	x	Xx	Xxxx	xxxx	Xxxx	-	-	-	-	-	-	x
Millet	xx	Xxxx	Xxxx	xxxx	Xxx	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sorghum	-	-	Xxx	xxxx	Xxxx	xxxx	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cow peas	xxx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	Xxx	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cassava	xxxxx	Xxxx										
Groundnuts	xx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sweet potatoes	xxx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	xxx	Xxx	Xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
Rice	-	-	-	-	-	xxxx	xxxx	Xxxx	-	-	-	-
Sun Hemp	xxx	xxx	Xxx	xxx	Xxx	xx						
Bambara nuts	xxx	Xxxx	Xxxx	xxxx	Xxxx	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vegetables	xxxx	Xxxx	xxx	xxxx								

Source: Drawn by 13 Women of the area. The groups of Xs are not exact numbers. They just symbolise small / medium / large volumes of crops available, each month in the year.

Visual 2: Flow Chart showing the causes and effects of poor farming



Source: Drawn by six youths in the area

Visual 3: Trend Analysis on key life issues

#	ISSUE	NOW (2003)	BEFORE (2002)
1	<i>Food security</i>	xxxxx	xx
2	Poverty levels	Xxx	xxx
3	Levels of employment	-	-
4	Income and expenditure	X	x
5	Performance of NGOs and other agencies	Xx	-
6	Credit	Xx	xxx
7	Deaths	Xxx	xxx
8	Value of Education	xxxxx	xx
9	Sanitation	X	xxx
10	Access to information on markets, crop and livestock production, release and utilisation of funds	Xxx	-
11	Quality of life in general	xxxx	xxx

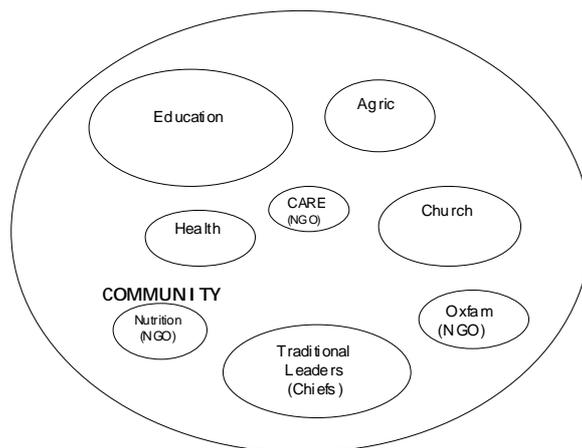
Source: Drawn by 18 Women of the area. The groups of Xs are not exact numbers. They just symbolise small / medium / large problem issues in the opinion of the community, in 2002 [before the rural development project started] and 2003 [progress to date].

Visual 4: Wealth Ranking in the district

Category	Issues	Score
Very rich	• Those who have a lot of cattle	XXX
	• Those who have agricultural implements	X
Rich	• Those who have large portions of land	XX
	• Those who are able to take their children to school	X
Moderate	• Those who can manage to eat at least 2 meals per day	XXX
Poor	• Those who do not have fields	XX
Very poor	• Orphans	X
	• Without children	XXXX
	• Without fields	
	• Those without cattle	X

Source: Drawn by eight youths of the area. Groups of Xs do not mean specific numbers. They symbolise the relative importance (in the opinions of the youth groups) of the various issues which define people's wealth in their community, from "very rich" to "very poor".

Visual 5: Value Diagram showing the institutions found in the district, and their relative value or importance to the community's life.



Source: Drawn by 15 men of the area. The sizes of the ovals for each institution symbolise the relative importance or value to this community, in the opinion of the group of men who were consulted.

Visual 6: Gender Analysis Matrix

ISSUES	MEN	WOMEN
Access to Land	15	5
Access to Income	10	10
Decision making	18	2
Access to credit	10	10

Source: Drawn by 18 Women of the area. The numbers do not always add up to 18, because participants in this community group could choose not to vote on some issues.