



Practitioner's Guide:

Participatory Needs Assessment - Nutrition and Food Security



Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Technische Zusammenarbeit
(GTZ) GmbH



Bundesministerium für
wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit
und Entwicklung

Participatory Needs Assessment: Nutrition and Food Security

Brief Description



Experience in most developing countries has shown that, when a community is fully involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of nutrition, poverty related or other development projects, efforts to improve nutrition are likely more effective. Participatory approaches often meet the perceived needs of the population in the community and enable processes to be more sustainable.

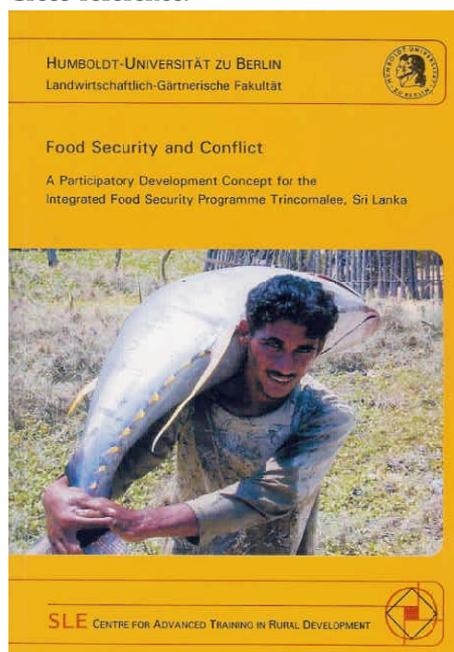
Malnutrition is a serious problem in many developing countries. Particular nutritional deficits are often identified in specific groups within a community rather than in the population as a whole. Therefore, interventions to improve nutrition should be targeted to these groups specifically, but need to address the population on the level of the entire community.

Participatory methods that facilitate the assessment of the villagers needs towards a better nutritional situation include:

- ▶ Semi-structured interviews.
- ▶ Group discussions on specific nutritional subjects.
- ▶ Village or transect walks and mapping.
- ▶ Problem analysis at community level through matrices and ranking.
- ▶ Institutional analysis through diagramming.

The following publication provides useful conceptual and methodological information to plan a participatory needs assessment in the context of nutrition and food security.

Cross-reference:



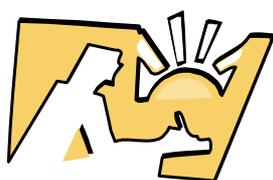
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Proposed Main Users

- ▶ Development field staff with knowledge in nutrition and public health.
- ▶ Social mobilisers or change agents working with and/or living in the community.
- ▶ Line Department Representatives (i.e. health agents, extension officers, etc.) and representatives of the people's organisation.



Purpose of the Method



Participatory Assessment Methods for the improvement of nutrition are applied to identify the nutritional problems from the point of view of the community, in order to design adequate interventions.

The purpose of the Participatory Needs Assessment is that the community, the development staff and the donor institution:

- ▶ Understand the food and nutrition situation of the community,
- ▶ Be aware of the existing constraints to adequate nutrition,
- ▶ Decide which problems should be given priority, and
- ▶ Identify resources available for undertaking activities to overcome malnutrition, health problems and inadequate nutrition related behaviour.

Nutrition is a good starting point for promoting people's participation and raising awareness of the multiples causes of malnutrition or the food and nutrition constraints facing the community.

In many cases, people within the community, especially women, are left out of problem identification, designing community projects or other development activities. However in nutrition related activities, women play a major role in production, processing, preparation and distribution of food.

Participatory assessment approaches in the community can therefore strengthen women's role and participation in overall community processes.

Due to the multi-sectoral character of food and nutrition issues, participatory assessment methods promote a general collaboration of local institutions. No single organisation can solve the nutritional problem alone. Solutions require institutional networking partners and cooperation.

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Advantages



- ▶ Provides information of the perceived needs, according to the community's nutritional and food problems.
- ▶ Provides useful qualitative information of the local food and nutrition situation from the point of view of the population.
- ▶ Is open and flexible for handling issues that emerge during the open interview situation or group discussion.
- ▶ Helps to understand the constraints of food and nutrition within the community.
- ▶ Raises awareness of people's nutritional habits and behaviour through discussions of the constraints.
- ▶ Respects cultural aspects of nutrition and local customs.
- ▶ Mobilises people's participation within the community and initiates community processes.
- ▶ Provides a good entry point for discussion of general development problems and conflicts facing the community.
- ▶ Involves women as well as men, governmental institutions as well as NGOs and community based organisations.

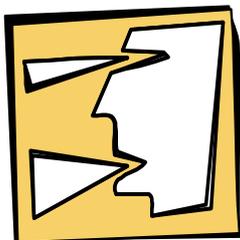
Limitations



- ▶ Needs time and specific skills in participatory methods and procedures.
- ▶ Risks creating a lot of expectations due to the atmosphere of trust and the time spent in the community.
- ▶ Does not provide a quantitative data base for statistical calculation to compare different regions, population groups etc.
- ▶ Should be completed with objective data, such as nutritional status measurements and prevalence of diseases, in order to estimate the real nutritional situation of the community in any of their complex aspects.

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Principles & General Procedures



Food and nutrition are very complex issues that are constantly influenced by political, institutional, economic and environmental changes. Therefore, process oriented and flexible methods seem appropriate in order to assess the community's food and nutritional situation.

Positive efforts towards a better nutrition depend on the ongoing dialogue and relationship between the community and the development worker or intermediary organisation. It is recommended to involve community leader and key persons in the preparatory phase of the Participatory Needs Assessment. Maintaining existing relationships and involving local leaders in any of the assessment steps can facilitate contacts with the villagers and assure the participation of the community.

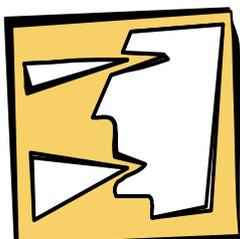
The Participatory Needs Assessment process for nutrition and food security projects consists of 4 main steps:

Step 1: Preparatory phase with different community agents

- ▶ Gather existing information.
 - a) Generally, there are local institutions working in the selected communities, which can provide important information on nutritional, health, agriculture or other issues. Once the key persons or development agents of local institutions are identified, nutrition related issues can be discussed informally.
 - b) Sometimes, community based organisations, schools or churches collect data for monitoring purposes. These data can highlight first issues on food and nutrition in the community.
- ▶ Strengthen the link to existing agencies and institutions which are working in the same region.
 - a) Institutions or service providers often exist even in small or remote communities. Make an inventory of any of the existing institution, NGO, technical committee, action group or community based organisation for future cooperation.
 - b) Promote community meetings to involve local institutions for general discussion on food and nutrition items.

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- ▶ Select a community and start the food and nutrition related dialogue.

The criteria for a community, for involvement in a nutrition or poverty related project, should be the degree of impact by a nutritional problem or poverty. Procedures of community selection can be applied systematically, if sufficient data is available. (see example PNA). For practical reasons, the development worker who knows the communities from the daily work, should select those that are obviously most in need.

The general rule is to apply Participatory Needs Assessment tools only in communities that will be involved in later project activities.

Step 2: Assessment phase with the involved community

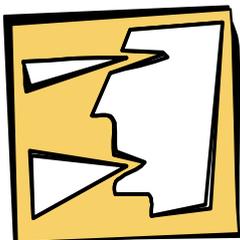
- ▶ What to assess? Food and nutrition related issues of interest.
 - Sometimes, people are not aware of their food or nutritional needs or problems. Furthermore, food production, nutrition and health habits, consumption pattern and coping strategies of the household change over time. Carrying out a Participatory Needs Assessment should therefore stress the nutrition-related issues of interest in each community (see Table 1).
 - Stimulate dialogue about changes, similarities and constraints between the households, rather than collect data in a questionnaire.

Table 1: Checklist of nutrition related issues of interest (Adopted from FAO, 1993)

↔ Local food systems and recent changes	↔ Food storage	↔ Nutritional status
↔ Food habits, preferences and related beliefs	↔ Food purchasing	↔ Diseases, causes and cures
↔ Activities of household members in relation to food and nutrition	↔ Food preparation and usage	↔ Caring capacity
↔ Production for household consumption	↔ Water supply and usage	↔ Social aspects
↔ Processing of local foods	↔ Environmental aspects	↔ Community organisation

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- ▶ How to assess? Methods for Participatory Needs Assessment of the people's nutritional and poverty related situation in the community

- a) Semi-structured interviews to key persons.

Semi-structured interviews are based on a list of guiding questions concerning a specific issue (i.e. nutrition or poverty). They contain pre-formulated answers to the respective questions, but are open for any other aspect that arises during the interview. Questions can be discussed, and new points of view can easily be integrated. The interview is mainly individual. Interview partners during participatory assessment processes are generally key persons, who have specific knowledge or experience on food and nutrition topics.

- b) Group discussions about nutritional items with household members.

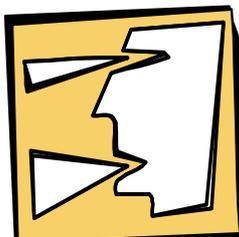
Another method of interviewing villagers is group discussion. A small group of people (8-15) is invited to discuss a specific nutritional topic. The group discussion needs a facilitator to guide the group and to ensure that everybody has the chance to talk. The facilitator should also guarantee that the discussion does not stray too far from its subject. The advantage of group discussions is that the dynamics of a dialogue can encourage people's participation and point of views concerning a specific problem. On the other hand, some discussions tend to be dominated by a limited number of community leaders. Nevertheless, compared to individual interviews, group discussion is the most likely adopted method of communication in many societies.

- c) Village or transect walks and mapping.

Walking through the village and having informal talks on food and nutritional items are very good starting points for familiarisation with the people and the situation. Important information of the surroundings can also be observed during transects. Local people are normally very eager to explain their living conditions, history and recent changes and serve as able guides during the walk. Households along the way can also be asked whether they have been informed of the participatory assessment methods and how they participate, etc. After the walk, the conclusions have to be drawn and visualised for further planning processes. Maps of the community can help clarify problems and identify solutions, e.g. the location of houses, water sources or other available resources.

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- d) Problem analysis at community level through a matrix and ranking.

The visualised information gathered during the Participatory Needs Assessment process can be summarised in a diagram or a problem tree, which shows the core problems and the origins of each identified problem. The problem tree provides a good basis for subsequent planning steps and helps the community to understand the causes of malnutrition.

Then, the facilitator of the Participatory Needs Assessment process can list the problem areas mentioned by the villagers in a matrix. He or she prepares a column for men and women separately. Ranking exercises can be started and are helpful to find out peoples preferences. Each person has the chance to give a point (or another token such as stones or seeds) to a specific problem listed in the matrix. The problem with the highest ranking is given priority for the subsequent intervention planning

- e) Institutional analysis through diagramming

A useful tool for institutional analysis can be the elaboration of diagrams. Participants list on cards all NGOs, community organisations and government services which are working in the village or community as well as their specific activities. Then ask the participants which kind of relationship they have and what are the constraints of cooperation. The cards could be located in relationship to each other, so the links between the organisations and service provider could be visualised. Any conflict or potentials mentioned by the participants could be drawn on the cards for further discussion.

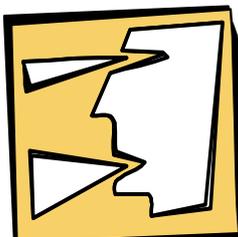
- f) Other participatory methods

1. Seasonal calendars of a community,
2. Nutritional stress calendars,
3. Time charts for daily activities of peasants or fishermen or
4. Popular theatre to raise awareness within the community.

Participatory tools should be used in an open and flexible way. The application of the methods depends on the creativeness and capacity of the involved population. Participatory methods have proven effective in promoting both participants of the community and development planners. In recent years, the described tools are almost integrated in most of the development activities.

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Step 3: Identifying activities to improve nutrition

- ▶ After the participants have identified their needs and analysed their food and nutritional problems, appropriate solutions to these problems are to be developed towards the improvement of the nutritional situation.
- ▶ Solutions should tackle the underlying causes of the nutritional problems identified by the people. The facilitator of the participatory processes helps the community to make the link between the identified causes in the problem tree and the possible activities to address the problem effectively. Due to the priorities of the ranking matrix, project efforts emphasize more on food production, consumption pattern or housing and sanitation.
- ▶ The main steps to develop the necessary interventions are:
 - a) Establish one objective for each priority problem.
 - b) Examine the possible activities and alternatives to attain these objectives.
 - c) Establish realistic and feasible results within a specific time frame.
 - d) Mobilise the necessary institutional support and resources for project implementation.
 - e) Establish contact with local organizations to obtain technical assistance.
 - f) Negotiate with local organizations possible partnership relations and/or co-financial contracts.
 - g) Design a simple monitoring and evaluation matrix for each project at community level, including the areas to be monitored, the selected indicators and the use of the obtained information.

Step 4: Visualization and report writing

- ▶ All steps of the Participatory Assessment procedures should be visualised and summarized in a report document. The report provides the identified problems and possible solutions for further planning processes at the community level and project level as well.
- ▶ The visualised charts, tables and problem trees designed, during the participatory process with the population, can also be exposed in public places of the community. It enables the community to monitor the progress and to readjust the activities, if necessary.

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