Needs Assessment for Policy Development

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Needs assessment

- It is important for policy developers to be aware of the competing and complementary influences on policy.
- The art of creating effective policy requires a balance of these influences and sometimes requires compromise or firm decision-making that will result in a policy that is the best achievable result but that will still leave some people unsatisfied.

Influences on policy

Evidence  Experience  Judgement
Resources  Values

Needs assessment

- Needs assessments are conducted to ensure that the detail of the policy matches the actual need in the community or organisation.
- If you have a clear idea of the vision and values of the group the policy will affect, you are already aware of some of the needs and sensitivities of that group.

Needs assessment

- When assessing needs ensure that you are aware of the needs of:
  - The government or organisation developing the policy;
  - The community or population that is the focus of the policy; and
  - Any partners that will be involved in delivering the policy.

Needs assessment

- The final needs assessment should map these multiple needs and recommend policy options that accommodate as many of the needs as possible.
- The needs assessment should also take into account how any of these needs are already being met by the organisation, partners and/or the community.
• Remember that there is a difference between 'need' and 'want'.
• 'Needs' are the elements of policy coverage, delivery, or evaluation that are required to achieve the policy objectives.
• 'Wants' are additional outcomes that may not be necessary to achieve the policy objectives.

Conducting a needs assessment
• There are a number of ways of assessing needs in organisations, among partners and in communities.
• Judgement and experience will shape the choice of means of assessing need and the degree of formality that is taken in the needs assessment.
• There is no 'correct method' of assessing needs that can be applied in all cases!

Assessing Organisational Need
• May be done through:
  - Review of existing documents such as strategic directions, legislative requirements or related policy documents;
  - May be done through a process of surveying relevant members of staff;
  - May be done through more open consultation processes;
  - In reality, may be dictated by senior officials.

Assessing Partner Needs
• Should be done after the organisations needs have been clarified.
• Should be focused on specific policy area.
• May also use formal (survey, consultation, policy review) processes or, in some instances, can be done informally through discussion or mutual agreement.
• Should never assume the needs of

Assessing Community Needs
• Usually involves (at a minimum) a consultation process that is focused on the policy being developed.
• This may be done through broad consultations, consultations with samples of the population; reviews of previous consultations/evidence; or consultations with expert or representative groups.
• Multiple consultations may be required.

Examples of Organisational Needs Assessment
• Policy gaps audits;
• Staff and/or customer surveys;
• Review of key documents including strategic directions documents, relevant policy documents, legislation;
• Conversations or consultations with senior organisational leaders or government officials. This may include politicians.
Examples of Partner Needs Assessment
- Organisational or senior management survey or consultations;
- Review of the partner agency’s relevant policies (if they permit);
- Discussion of service gaps that have been identified from their clients/customers;
- As a result of negotiated contracts or other mutual agreements.

Examples of Community Needs Assessments
- Community forums;
- Results of community concerns expressed through correspondence to agencies or politicians; news coverage; special interest groups; or existing mechanisms for community input;
- Conducting ‘citizen’s juries’;
- Through surveys or questionnaires;
- As a result of protest or civil action.

Putting it all together
- Once the multiple needs assessments have been done there must be a process of determining which needs will be met through the policy and how they will be both met and reported to stakeholders.
- The needs-based policy objectives then need to be communicated back to the stakeholders.

Discussion of service gaps that have

Putting it all together
- Where some needs are being met by external partners, there must be clear communication of this with all stakeholders.
- In some cases it will be important to have a formal agreement about the way that identified needs are being met by all the relevant players.

A needs assessment is only one part of the process of developing policy – you still need to work out how the needs will be met, by whom, when, where, and with what resources. You will also need to determine how you will assess the effectiveness and impact of the policy and how you will report your results. Finally, you will need to determine when and how the policy will be reviewed.