

Advocacy strategies look for solutions to real problems. The success of advocacy depends on how the problem is selected, who cares about the problem and how well it is understood.

But many advocacy strategies have difficulty in achieving their goals because the problem they seek to address:

- is not clearly defined or understood;
- is not perceived as a priority problem by a large number of people—especially by excluded groups whom the advocacy is intended to benefit;
- is not narrowed down sufficiently to a *specific issue* with a workable strategy.

Sometimes these mistakes occur because advocacy strategies respond more to donor trends than real needs and opportunities for change. Sometimes, NGO staff “cook up” a project or strategy based on well-intentioned assumptions about the problems that “poor women” or “rural farmers” face. Meanwhile poor women and farmers may have different priorities and desired solutions. In other cases, the way a problem is defined does not match the way it is experienced by those people. So, those affected cannot relate to the proposed solution.

Being involved in defining problems pulls people into the political and advocacy process at a personal level. Looking at one’s own reality and making choices about what really matters and what really needs to be solved is an important step in building critical awareness and active citizens.

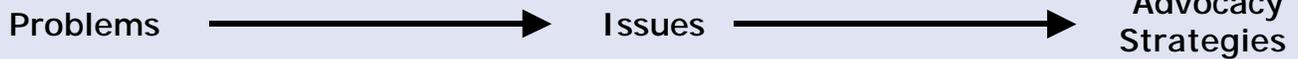
In this chapter, we offer tips for identifying advocacy problems, including participatory ways of defining problems with constituency groups. These approaches are suitable both for advocacy groups starting out and for groups that have *already chosen* their issues. The tips and how-tos can help the latter refine their understanding of how the issue is experienced by people, and get buy-in from and broaden their constituencies.

## Understanding Problems for Advocacy Planning

For advocates, a problem is a negative situation affecting a specific group of people. Examples of problems are poor healthcare, corruption, unemployment, gender violence, crime, or environmental degradation. These general problems are found in many places, but their characteristics vary widely depending on the context.

Each problem is made up of a variety of different *issues*. A “good” advocacy issue is focused enough so that it can be linked to a clear policy/political solution and can be easily communicated to many people.

For example, poor healthcare is a problem nearly everywhere in the world, but the specific *issues* differ widely from country to country. In the United States, one critical issue is the price of prescription drugs. In Malawi access to basic health services is a bigger issue. In advocacy, it is important to first understand the broad problem. But it is also important to define and prioritize issues because each issue will have its own hook that links it to specific policies, people and institutions with power (see Chapter 11).



For social justice advocacy, problems that have a serious effect on marginalized groups in society, like women, small-scale farmers and migrant workers, are a priority. Nevertheless, advocacy problems that concern both marginalized groups and other social sectors provide good opportunities for building bridges and a broader support base.

Generally, there are two types of problems: **process** problems and **concrete** problems. Although they are often interconnected, each type presents different dilemmas and possibilities for organizing and political work.

### Process Problems

Process problems relate to how decisions are made and implemented. They include transparency, accountability, corruption, discrimination, and repression.

It is sometimes difficult to mobilize around process problems because they seem too abstract. When people are struggling with basic survival issues, it is difficult to explain why these problems matter. In such cases, concrete problems are a better starting point for advocacy.

However, there are times when many different people feel strongly about process problems. For example, during times of reform and political transition, process problems like corruption and repression can be the rallying cry that unifies many sectors of society. Similarly, international policymaking meetings, like the World Trade Organization meetings, the Social Summit, and the UN 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women, are all moments when advocacy has effectively focused on process problems.

Like all problems, broad process concerns eventually need to be broken down into concrete issues in order to push for specific policies, budgets, practices, and programs.

### Concrete Problems

These are problems with a concrete, or physical impact. They often have to do with basic needs or violations of basic rights such as land use or ownership, healthcare, education, toxic wastes, and gender violence. To solve these problems, you often also need to address process problems. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the concrete problems usually makes them an easier starting point to mobilize people. Concrete problems are also sometimes called “fundamental” problems.

#### Commentary on Practical vs. Strategic Interests

Some gender analysts use a planning tool that looks at problems by distinguishing between “*practical needs*” and “*strategic interests*.” *Practical needs* are needs that, if met, will improve a woman’s life but not change her subordinate status. Water and health care are examples. *Strategic interests* are interests that, if met, will challenge the inequality between men and women. Legal rights and domestic violence are examples. This distinction has helped to broaden the thinking of many development agencies. However, it is not so useful for advocacy. Often a practical problem is easier to mobilize around and, in the end, turns out to be just as strategic. Further, advocacy is itself a political, strategic way of challenging inequality, regardless of the issues.

## Problem Statements: Getting Specific

A *problem statement* is a short description of the problem in a specific context. Producing a common problem statement helps avoid confusion and conflicting interpretations of the problem later on in planning.

For example, we often think “reproductive health,” “constitutional reform,” or “corruption” adequately describe a problem. But these shorthand terms do not give enough information if different people and organizations are to work together. For example, the problem of reproductive health may be understood by some people as lack of access to contraception and prenatal care. For others it includes feelings of shame regarding sexuality. Both views have to do with reproductive health, but each calls for a different strategy. Sometimes these shorthand descriptions describe a solution—reproductive health—not a problem.

The characteristics of problems will be different in different countries. The increasingly global scale of some advocacy initiatives

makes it even more important to have a clear problem statement to facilitate clear communication between activists. But it is equally important for the staff of a single organization to produce a common problem description. See the problem statement examples in the box below.

The exercise on the following page can be helpful for groups that have already chosen their problem to better describe how the problem is experienced from the perspective of real people. It can also help reframe the shorthand description of a problem in a more effective way.

Examples of Problem Statements	
SHORTHAND DESCRIPTIONS	PROBLEM STATEMENTS
Inadequate Girls' Education <i>(from Ghana)</i>	There is a higher school drop-out rate among girls because many parents believe that investing in girls' education is a waste of resources since they will get married. In addition, teachers and school materials do not reinforce the importance of girls' education. Some parents also need to put their kids to work to be able to survive.
Poor Healthcare <i>(from Zimbabwe)</i>	Basic health care is too expensive for low-income and poor people, and inaccessible to most rural residents. Drugs are unavailable and costly. Hospitals and clinics are understaffed or staffed by poorly qualified personnel. People are not educated about their health and are unable to demand better treatment or clarify what ails them and their families. This problem has a greater impact on women and children, who have specific healthcare needs, and who must look after other family members when they are ill.
Labor Rights Abuses <i>(from India)</i>	Workers work 12-hour days in poorly lit plants. Wages are less than 50 cents per hour. Frequently workers do not receive their wages for extended periods of time. They are unable to make demands because of threats that they will lose their job.

## Purpose

- To understand that broad problems have many different dimensions and that the nature of the problem varies according to the context and the individual.
- To begin to see who might be the potential constituency groups for advocacy.

## Process

(Time: 1 hour)

In this exercise, small groups of three to four participants identify the concrete characteristics of a problem from the perspective of two individuals in their country who experience the problem. This analysis is presented on newsprint in the form of a drawing. The presentations are followed by in-depth discussion.

1. Choose two different individuals in your country who are affected by the problem. Describe them in detail, including age, race/ethnicity, gender, family arrangements, employment or income source, class, and location. For example, in Peru you might choose the following two distinct cases on the problem of poor reproductive health on the next page.
2. Draw a line down the middle of a piece of newsprint. On each side, draw a figure to represent each of the individuals. Write the person's characteristics at the bottom of the page under their feet.
3. Identify the specific concerns or symptoms that each person faces in relation to the broad problem. What would this woman or man say are her/his specific concerns? How does this person feel the problem? For example, a person is unlikely to say, "poor reproductive health services" but may say, "I don't want to have more children." Write these concerns and problems around each of the figures in random order as in the drawing.
4. Once you complete step 3, identify other problems that the individuals might not mention and write these in a different color. For example, these could include a lack of legal information or access to courts.
5. Present the drawings to the full group for discussion and deeper analysis.

## Discussion

*Comparing the two characters in each drawing:*

- What would each person consider to be the priority concern?
- Are there common specific issues facing the two different figures?
- What are the most important differences in their experiences? Why do you think these differences exist?

*Comparing all of the drawings:*

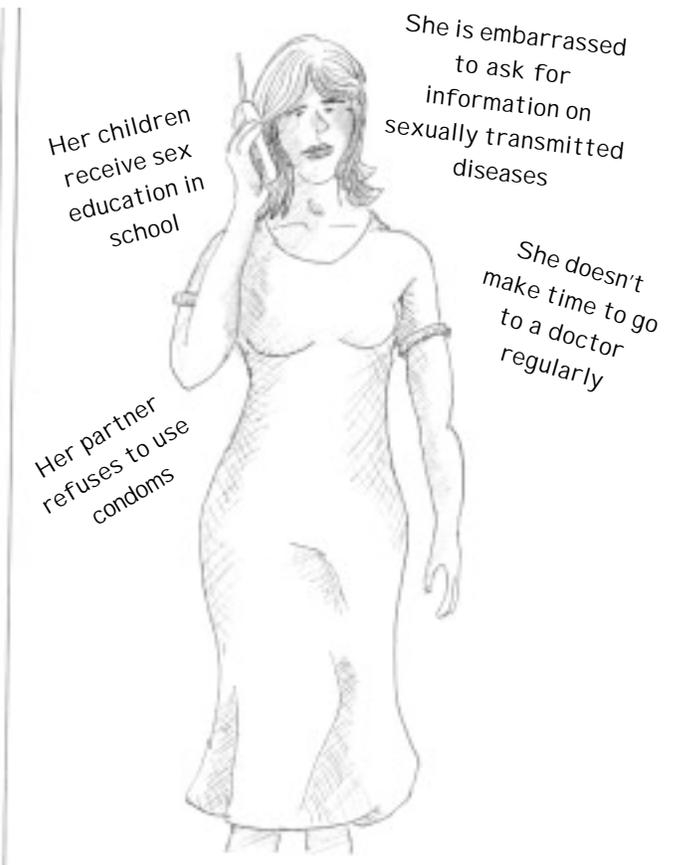
- Of the different individuals in the drawings, who is the most affected by the problem? Why?
- Which aspects of the problem will require more research with the affected people to understand the issues and overall problem better?
- Are there commonalities that link the individuals that might offer possibilities for broad alliances?

**Follow-up**

You can complete this exercise by developing a problem statement. You can also draw up a list of questions to be answered through participatory research.



22 years old, born in a rural, indigenous community. She studied through 4th grade in elementary school. She had her first child when she was 14 years old. Now she has four children and works on a farm.



37 years old, born in the city. She has some university education and had her first child when she was 25. She now has two children, is divorced, and works in an office.

From a regional Latin American advocacy workshop held in Brazil in 2001.

## Some Guiding Questions to Get Specific About Problems and Constituencies

An advocacy strategy often takes shape around a problem that is already the focus of ongoing work. But it still helps to describe what the problem looks like in the eyes of those who feel it. Since people are diverse, they often feel the problem differently. So it is important to know who is affected, and how, and who really cares about the problem.

Here are some questions to help with that analysis:

### Who Defines This as a Problem?

Answering this question will tell you who some of your potential constituents, supporters and opponents are. If the people who suffer most from the problem do not think it is a priority, then they are unlikely to get involved in the advocacy. Or—for example in the case of people exposed to toxic chemicals—they need more information to get involved.

Consultation at the local level to define the problem and break it down into issues helps to build constituencies. However, some advo-

cates believe that there is no time for this kind of grassroots consultation on a burning issue. They say that they already *know* what people care about and don't need to ask. But without their buy-in it will be difficult to engage them in the continuous efforts of support and monitoring change.

### Who Is Directly Affected by This Problem?

The people who are most directly affected by a problem have the most to gain from a solution. These people are the local or primary constituency. In a global campaign, the local constituency may be spread across many different countries. Often, they are the most motivated to seek a solution. They also give your advocacy legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers who otherwise may dismiss advocates as troublemakers. The local constituency may be diverse with regard to gender, class, race, and other characteristics. Developing a detailed profile that includes some of these factors will help you focus your education, outreach and other advocacy activities. In addition, if the problem affects particular communities, it can be helpful to know about local decisionmaking structures and local leaders.

### Tips on Getting to Concrete Issues

NGOs and advocates often refer to problems in the abstract. They speak about problems of “globalization,” “women’s subordination,” or “unemployment.” These large problems are important, but they may be too broad and abstract to be clear advocacy issues. Advocacy issues link more easily to a clear policy or political solution when they are focused. A more concrete meaning will also help mobilize and engage people.

For example, during a budget advocacy workshop, the Uganda Debt Network narrowed the broad problems on the left hand side into the more focused advocacy issues on the right.

Rural Poverty	—————▶	Inadequate access to extension services
Healthcare	—————▶	Primary healthcare costs and quality
Education	—————▶	Quality and fees for public elementary schools
Corruption	—————▶	Demands for bribes by teachers and healthcare workers

### Who Cares Deeply that this Problem Should Be Solved?

Experienced organizers know that frustration and anger can be good indicators that a person is motivated to work for change. These deep emotions are not always immediately visible. In particular, they are often slower to come out in communities where social structures, poverty or other factors make people appear resigned or apathetic. Discussion, probing, and trust will help to surface people’s concerns.

### Who Is Not Affected but Cares Enough to Support Change?

People can also care deeply about issues that do not affect them directly. For example, many people are concerned about environmental degradation although they don’t experience it in their own backyard. People also express solidarity because they believe in group rights related to gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

## Constituency-Building Approaches for Defining Problems

Defining problems is an important step in constituency-building and citizenship. It also informs your problem statement and lays the basis for your choice of strategies. *Problem definition* is iterative like the rest of advocacy planning (see Chapter 6). Through ongoing analysis, people narrow their focus to a single common concern that is actionable. Generally,

Regardless of whether you begin advocacy planning before or after a problem has been identified, participatory consultation and discussion with constituents and stakeholders helps to develop a common definition of the problem and begins to build ownership of the advocacy.

#### For Issue-Focused Groups:

Where constituencies and stakeholders have identified or share a common concern, the broad problem is already clear. The task then is to narrow it down to a concrete issue by finding out what people are most concerned about. Later you can narrow down further by considering what is actionable through advocacy.

#### For Groups Without an Issue Agenda:

Where there is no common focus, activities such as participatory surveys and public dialogue will surface problems. Further analysis and negotiation will help identify a priority problem and a specific issue. The process meanwhile builds local, grassroots constituencies because it allows for face-to-face learning and confidence-building.

the analysis involves:

- asking, listening, discussing, debating, and negotiating;
- introducing facts and analysis to inform the discussion;
- narrowing the lens on the higher-priority aspects of the problem;
- using additional research and dialogue with groups living with the problem to further define the problem.

If the problem definition process utilizes broad consultation and face-to-face discussion, it can:

- broaden interest in advocacy;
- stimulate the emergence of potential local leaders—people who feel strongly enough to dedicate their time and energize others;
- produce a clearer understanding of the problem and priority issues;
- facilitate political awareness, where citizens recognize how the political process can both perpetuate injustices and offer ways to find solutions.

## Purpose

- To understand how different ways of asking questions elicit different responses and create different impressions;
- To clarify how these shape the quality of information you receive and either help or hinder your organizing efforts.

## Process

(Time: 1 hour)

The illustrations on the next page show different ways of asking questions. Usually, organizations enter a community with a clear agenda. In Box 2, the organization is asking about the concerns of the people present, using open-ended questioning. In Box 1 technical experts are explaining a problem they have already identified rather than opening a discussion for people to describe how they experience it.

1. Ask participants to look carefully at the two pictures in the illustration and describe what is happening in each. Compare what is happening using the following questions:
  - What is the role of the outsider? How is she/he perceived by the community?
  - Does the community feel involved in the learning? Why or why not?
  - What do you think will be the product of each of these discussions with regard to problem identification and group motivation?
  - Which approach(es) will elicit the most accurate information about what people care about?
  - Have you seen either approach?
2. After the participants have discussed and compared the two pictures, summarize the differences between the approaches. Refer to Chapter 4 on participatory learning and Chapter 5 on types of participation.

### Tips on Talking with Strangers in Public Spaces

Finding out what people really care about requires respect for others, ease in speaking with others, and active listening. Active listening means listening carefully, asking people to clarify what they have said, and interpreting nonverbal cues, like facial expression and posture. It is also important to be aware of what you communicate to others by your own posture, eye contact, and general appearance. You don't need to look exactly like the people you speak with in order to make them feel at ease. What's important is your attitude, a sense of solidarity, and your skill in asking questions. (See the *Annex* for more on the skills of active listening on page ###.)

## #1



What are the biggest problems you face day to day?



## #2

## Specific Participatory Approaches

Participatory approaches to problem definition combine dialogue, communication, and trust-building. If you are an outsider, there are several steps and approaches you need to consider in order to engage potential constituents effectively.

### Step 1: Getting to Know Constituents

Getting to know your constituents involves two tasks. First, you have to get accurate information about their needs and options. Second, you need to build enough trust to be able to work together. The approaches you use depend on the scale and level of your advocacy. For example, global advocacy will utilize the Internet much more. When you are an outsider, here are some different ways to get to know your constituents and their backgrounds:

#### *From Existing Documentation*

Information about the problem and the community you are working with is probably available through development and donor agencies, UN organizations, the World Bank, government statistics bureaus, and universities.

#### *From Observation*

Just by watching carefully, an external organizer can learn something about what people are like, what they care about, who their leaders are, and other important information.

#### *By Visiting Gathering Sites*

Places like bars, grocery stores, sports fields, and wells are a good way to meet several people at once. Often specific kinds of people meet in particular locations. In some countries, many people gather and talk at shopping malls, especially young and older people. In contrast, you will usually meet only children and women at a pump or well in a rural village.

### **Public Calls for Action**

Using media such as a radio or newspaper spot, a town meeting, a poster campaign, or an electronic mailing list can ask people who care to contact the organizers. These public calls begin a dialogue between organizers and people who are concerned about an issue. This method will mainly reach people who are already informed.

### Step 2: Ways to Identify Problems

There are several ways to engage people in discussing problems and issues, including:

- A written survey using a questionnaire
- One-on-one interviews and door-to-door canvassing
- A participatory needs assessment
- Focus group discussions
- Informal conversation in public spaces

Choosing the most suitable approach depends on:

- the audience you want to reach;
- the information you want to get and to communicate;
- the involvement you hope to generate;
- the relationship you want to establish;
- the resources you have at your disposal.

We discuss these approaches below:

#### **A Survey**

A survey uses a questionnaire to obtain facts, ideas and opinions from individuals. It can provide information about what people care about and can be used to show the magnitude of a problem or demand. The findings can be persuasive for your advocacy message.

However, surveys are labor intensive and demand a lot of preparation. Drawing up a questionnaire requires skill. It is important to

avoid bias and leading questions if you want the results to be taken seriously. A written survey which people fill in themselves saves time and costs in terms of interviewers. But it often gets a poor or biased response because not everybody completes the questionnaire or is literate. And it does not allow people to meet and talk face-to-face. A survey conducted face-to-face provides an opportunity for the interviewer to talk to the interviewee. That conversation can be an important part of advocacy.



Timing is key for house-to-house surveys

Because people respond individually in a survey, it is not the best way to build collective spirit or enable people to find common ground. A questionnaire can be used together with focus group discussions, a workshop, or another type of group-building encounter.

### ***One-on-One Interviews and Door-to-Door Canvassing***

These methods are useful for probing sensitive issues. They avoid the discomfort people may feel about talking in public (see note on risk and safety on page ###). Face-to-face interviews enable you to discover things that may not arise from a questionnaire, such as anger and frustration. Citizen action organizations in the USA have often gone door to door to find out what people are concerned about. The strategy works best where people live close to one another. It also depends on having sufficient people to go door to door and on the willingness of people to talk to them.

### ***A Participatory Needs Assessment***

A participatory needs assessment is a group-based survey of a community's perceptions of their problems and desired solutions. There are many approaches and techniques and count-

less manuals that describe them. Some participatory assessments—such as rapid rural appraisal—can involve many different groups within a community, and facilitate the exchange of ideas. These are discussed in more detail on page ###.

### ***Focus Group Discussions***

These discussions bring together 5–25 people who live in a common situation to discuss their views and concerns. Focus groups can generate more information than one-on-one interviews because the dialogue produces more ideas and an exchange of views. Using focus groups for citizen education and advocacy is described on pages 163-164.

### ***Informal Conversation in Public Spaces***

This can be the least costly and simplest way to talk with a range of people. Unfortunately, certain kinds of people have more time or ability to talk than others. For example, older and younger people tend to have more time. And often men have more time and opportunity than women. These differences may skew your results.

Nevertheless, public spaces can be a good way to gain information and reach people on issues they care about. For example, when UK-based Christian Aid organized a campaign to get supermarkets to purchase goods in a socially responsible manner, it organized in front of the supermarkets talking to shoppers. Similarly, a campaign around water use can be organized at wells in rural areas. The strategy works because it is easy to link the issue with what people are doing at the public place—gathering water, getting medical treatment, standing in lines for public services, buying food, picking up children from school. The location sparks discussion and helps you identify who is affected and who cares.

Most of the approaches above are ideal for local constituency-building because they involve face-to-face discussion. Some can

also be more labor intensive and costly. For national, regional and global advocacy, the local processes will need to be adapted, and can be complemented by electronic surveys. A drawback to using electronic tools is that many marginalized groups are not computer-literate and have no access to the technology.

Identifying problems involves a two-way dialogue in which concerns, opinions, and information are shared. The outside facilitator is not just there to ask questions. The facilitator must also probe, and can introduce new ideas and information. In this way, the dialogue can be a moment for:

- education and information
- group building
- exploring community potential
- building a relationship between organizers and constituents where each side recognizes the contribution of the other

### Some Thoughts on Power Differences within Groups

Development and government agencies sometimes treat communities or groups, such as poor people and women, as if they were homogeneous. In the end, projects have failed because the most powerful members in the groups dominate, and other people's needs and interests are not satisfied. Every community or social group has a hierarchy of power and control that may be constructed along gender, race, class, age, or other lines.

It is important to consider this hierarchy when organizing. For example, women's voices are usually heard less in mixed groups. Women often do not feel confident to speak in the company of men. In some cases, women may not be allowed to meet in public without their husband or father's permission. At the same time, men may feel threatened when they are excluded from women's meetings and not informed about what is happening. Organizers need to be sensitive to these possible dynamics and make adjustments to be inclusive.

Depending on the level of gender equality in a given context, it may be advisable to work with women and men separately during the problem identification and analysis and issue selection process. Because these moments are critical for investment in and ownership of the advocacy process, it is important that each individual be able to engage and contribute his or her ideas without hesitation. Once the analysis has been completed, women and men can come together to share their views and look for common ground. Even when these adjustments are made, conflict may arise. (See chapters 15 and 17 for ideas on managing conflict.)

Remember that gender is only one determinant of power. There are also important differences among women and among men. Recognizing the different axes of power that are in play in different contexts is vital for effective advocacy and constituency-building. Treating people with common problems as the same only serves to reinforce inequalities and keep people from being active citizens.

One way to identify inequalities in a community or group is with the Access and Control Profile. This gender analysis tool shows the power differences between women and men, but can also be applied to any disadvantaged subgroup. For example, you can add economic status, race, age or religion. The profile asks questions about who has access to and who controls resources. *Access* refers to the opportunity to make use of something. *Control* has to do with decision making about the use of resources and benefits. Because it asks these important questions, development of a participatory profile can be motivating and politicizing for those involved. Analysis of difference and power dynamics in one’s own community is important for political awareness. (See gender terminology on page ###)

RESOURCES	Access		Control	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Economic and productive</i>				
-Land				
-Equipment				
-Education and training				
-Labor				
-Cash				
-Other				
<i>Political</i>				
-Leadership				
-Education and training				
-Information				
-Citizenship skills				
-Legal rights				
-Other				
<b>BENEFITS</b>				
Income				
Property ownership				
Basic needs (food, clothing, shelter)				
Education				
Political power and prestige				
Other				

Adapted from: March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay, *A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks*, Oxfam Publishing, Oxford 1999, 34.

The chart below can be used by organizers to map out and prioritize the best places to identify problems.

- **Column 1** asks you to list the various places where the kind of data you need could be best gathered: door-to-door; gathering places (e.g. self-service laundries, wells, bars, parks/ playgrounds, lines for services, stores and malls, etc.); places where people experience the problems (if consumers are angry about the high prices at the local market, talk to them outside the market); places where the problem is treated (human services agencies, hospitals, health clinics, counseling centers).
- **Column 2** asks you to think of the kind of data that you need to gather from interviews with individuals in each of the areas.
- **Column 3** asks you to generate kinds of questions that can be asked of each source in order to get the data you need.
- **Column 4**, because an organizer's time is precious, asks you to prioritize the locations which are most useful for discussing issues with a range of people.

Identifying Problems & Issues				
POSSIBLE DATA GATHERING PLACES	NAMES OF PLACES / PEOPLE	WHAT INFORMATION DO WE NEED?	QUESTIONS TO ASK IN EACH SITUATION	RANKED ORDER OF IMPORTANCE
Door-to-Door				
Gathering Places				
Public spaces				
Places Where People Experience the Problem				
Where Problem is Treated				
Places to Get Documentation of the Problem				
Where to Get Information on Root Cause				
People Who Cause the Problem				

Adapted from *How to Make Citizen Involvement Work*, Duane Dale, Citizen Involvement Training Project, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1978.

After talking to people about the problems and issues they face, the following chart can be used to help you map and start analyzing your findings. Both of these charts can be used by a number of organizers and constituents as joint tools of planning and analysis.

Comparing Perceptions of the Problem						
<i>How the...</i>	community	local power structure	general public	NGOs & social services	government (district / national)	regional / international agencies (World Bank)
perceive(s) the problem						
perceive(s) the solutions						
perceive(s) the community						

When you have filled in the chart, the following questions may help guide your analysis of the information:

- Where are the differences?
- Which differences do you need to clear up first?
- Where are the conflicts?
- What can be done to clear up the conflicts?
- Why do the conflicts exist?

Adapted from *How to Make Citizen Involvement Work*, Duane Dale, Citizen Involvement Training Project, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1978 and *From the Roots Up*, by Peter Gubbels and Catheryn Koss, World Neighbors, 2000.

## More on Participatory Assessments

Typically participatory assessments have been used for development projects. When effectively done, they provide a comprehensive picture of a community's situation—its needs, resources, values, expectations, problems and their causes, as well as the community's internal dynamics and social hierarchies. Unfortunately, some assessments result in a “shopping list” of needs without any

real analysis. Often they do not move onto identifying solutions. Participants learn skills and gain confidence, but they often do not get the tools to influence political and economic decisionmaking.

Participatory assessments are known by a variety of names: community needs assessments, participatory or action research, organizational diagnosis, participatory rural or rapid rural appraisals and social assessments. Many of the techniques and exercises used are

### Participatory Research in Nicaragua

In the 1980s, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education sponsored a pilot participatory assessment in the rural village of El Regadio as a follow-up to the 1980 national literacy campaign. The Ministry wanted to use the assessment in designing a nationwide strategy to promote community-based education linked to development. With the help of external staff, community leaders conducted a questionnaire survey on the needs, problems and possibilities for better education and organization in the village. The external staff members all had a background in community development and popular education and one person lived in the community for several months during the assessment. The external staff assisted the community team responsible for coordinating the process by helping them set goals, develop appropriate survey questions, design and carry out a survey, use participatory methods and analyze information once it was gathered. Based on this assessment, community members then made decisions about a variety of local development projects and used advocacy to gain support for their changes with local officials.

The community regarded the survey with a combination of surprise, suspicion and pride. They remembered previous surveys run by local landowners interested in expanding their holdings, by corrupt government officials interested in getting cheap resources and by urban-based professionals interested in gathering data. But they realized that a survey run by local people was different. Community residents came together to discuss the findings, which were drafted on large charts. Many residents spoke publicly for the first time. One man leaned on his friend to overcome his nervousness in expressing his opinion. Two women disagreed with the finding that only two women “worked.” “We women live working” they pointed out.

Residents ranked their problems and prioritized solutions. Members of the two agricultural cooperatives proposed to diversify their production and use the land more efficiently. In order to present their information and conclusions to officials, residents produced a booklet which they printed themselves on a handmade silk screen. Convincing government agronomists who had not been part of the process to back their ideas was difficult. In some cases, officials felt their authority was being undermined. After much negotiation and intervention from higher authorities, the relevant ministry agreed to support the residents' proposal. As a result of the changes, the cooperative increased its dairy and grain production and was awarded a prize for being the most outstanding community enterprise in the region. Village women formed a vegetable production group and several went on to take up leadership in regional organizations working on development.

From Lisa VeneKlasen, *El Regadio*, unpublished report, 1983.

drawn from popular education and community development. They include power maps and stakeholder analyses, community surveys, problem ranking exercises, community resources mapping and inventories, and planning frameworks.

### **Participatory Assessments as Citizen Education and Organization Strategies**

Participatory assessments vary in the level of community involvement and control over how the information is used. Approaches that involve the community in all stages—from deciding what kind of information to gather to planning follow-up action—tend to be the most effective for building citizen participation. These approaches build community capacity, leadership and citizenship skills. They enable people to work with and hold government and other relevant agencies accountable.

In community-directed assessments, groups such as women's associations or water users initiate the assessment and decide if and when they need an outside NGO or academic group to help them with some steps in the process. In other instances, NGOs, international agencies, and outsiders initiate the assessment. Ideally, outsiders work closely with the community to make the process as participatory as possible. Support institutions can play an important role in helping groups acquire analytical tools and skills for advocacy (see box on next page).

Participatory assessments can be ideal for beginning an advocacy effort as they build local constituent involvement and surface critical issues. But participatory assessments are not always empowering. Sometimes, participants are seen only as information sources or implementers for activities that are decided elsewhere. In some cases, the community is not told the final results of the assessment. The interventions raise expectations

that leave people feeling disillusioned. As a result, people lose interest in participating in any surveys and advocacy efforts.

### **The Costs and Benefits of Participatory Assessments**

The common argument against participatory assessments is that they are time consuming and resource intensive. Because of this, they tend to be small-scale or rushed. Smaller NGOs are often unable to afford the staff time. Many organizations end up arguing with their donors on whether such an assessment is necessary, despite the fact that they improve the efficiency and effectiveness of outside interventions. On the other hand, large development institutions and donors are themselves increasingly attempting participatory assessments. For example, The World Bank has carried out numerous Participatory Poverty Assessments around the globe. The methodology and level of real participation vary widely. In some cases the assessments have presented opportunities for local NGOs to engage with their constituents and with governments in a way that was previously impossible.

#### **For More on Participatory Assessment**

Also see the website for the Participation Group at the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, UK: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip> for a variety of cases and resources on participatory assessment; and *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*, Irene Guijt and Meera Kaul Shah, Editors, Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd., London, 1998; and *Power, Process and Participation: Tools for Change*, Rachel Slocum, Lori Wichhart, et al., Editors, Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd., London, 1998.

## More on Focus Groups

Focus group approaches can be adapted for community organizing and problem definition. The idea of focus groups comes originally from the advertising world. There, small discussion circles are used to test people's tastes, interests, and responses to new products. Political advisors and researchers use focus groups to measure public opinion, test policy ideas, and political priorities.

Development agencies use focus groups to gain information for program design. Women's and citizens groups have used focus groups to develop alternative policy frameworks, and legislative agendas.

Focus groups can be run in a variety of ways with different degrees of community participation and control. Standard politically-motivated focus groups tend to be led and controlled by an outside facilitator. The process tends to be extractive; participants from the local commu-

nity generally do not gain any new information, and serve mainly as information providers.

On the other hand, participatory focus groups are facilitated discussions that involve debate, analysis and planning. They can serve as both a research tool and a learning dialogue for those involved and can be linked to local action and organizing.

Focus groups are usually one to two hours in length. They can follow a structured format that involves 6–10 questions, each with follow-up questions that probe for more details. Alternatively, they can be based on only one or two broadly framed questions that open up a free interchange. Discussion is led by one or two facilitators who are assisted by a record keeper. The facilitator can either actively lead the conversation or remain silent and let the dynamics of the group take over.

In Botswana, South Africa, Benin (see page 162), and the Philippines (see Chapter 12,

### Important Note on Risk

Asking questions and encouraging people to speak their mind is not always a good idea. At certain times it may be risky for local people. For example, sometimes when peasants meet with outsiders, local bosses follow-up with intimidation. Peasants' lives can then be in danger. Similarly, in many communities it is dangerous for women to speak with strangers, let alone voice their opinion on sensitive issues like rape or incest. If they do so, they may be threatened by male family members. If your consultation is going to take the lid off problems that are hidden, make sure that there are support services if people need help. For example, in Kenya in the late 1980s, a legal rights group launched a campaign against family violence. They placed posters throughout Nairobi asking people to denounce this "crime." They were overwhelmed by women calling for help and were not able to meet the demand. The campaign seemed to provoke more family conflict when women spoke out. In the end, the organizers decided to take down the posters and redirect their strategy.

Asking questions in a tightly controlled political context is especially risky. To minimize risk:

- work with local groups where possible;
- get to know the local area, its social and cultural taboos, and its political dynamics, before organizing public discussion;
- if you hold focus groups or public meetings, prepare facilitators well beforehand.

page ### ), women's organizations have used focus groups to develop a national gender platform and strengthen their base. These initiatives integrated the voices of grassroots women into documents that were then used in electoral and legislative advocacy. Over a two year period, an alliance of citizens groups in Panama carried out focus groups with different sectors throughout the country to define an alternative to the government's Five Year Development Plan. The alternative plan has been used in a range of advocacy activities.

Focus groups were a core activity of a two year women's political participation strategy in Benin carried out by four local NGOs and the Global Women in Politics (GWIP) program in the late 1990s. Emerging from decades of dictatorship, Benin held its first fair elections in 1991. The project took shape with the aim of getting women more involved as citizens in the political reform process and as an alternative to training-women-to-run for elections. Despite elections, GWIP and its partners knew that citizenship was a relatively new concept for Beninese women. They felt that the few women who would stand for elections were unlikely to promote a women's rights agenda. Most citizens did not see the relevance of politics to their lives so the key parties and legislators were free to set their own agendas. Progress toward government accountability seemed unlikely without more engagement by civil society.

The project created a process that brought women together to express their interests and concerns. Following focus group discussions, women elected representatives from each group to participate in the development of a Women's Issues Platform in the capital city, Cotonou. The Platform was to be used in advocacy with candidates, voters, and legislators. The project created a microcosm of democratic process for both the participating NGOs and the grassroots women with whom they worked.

Before the project, the four local partner organizations worked mainly in traditional development and education initiatives. They had not been exposed to advocacy or formal politics. It took some time before everyone recognized and had a common understanding about the linkages between development and democracy. At first the partners felt that gathering the opinions of their "beneficiaries" was a waste of resources. But eventually they agreed and carried out 70 focus groups, involving more than 1,000 women and every district of the country.

The project initiated a formal alliance between the partners. By the end of the project, the four partner groups saw themselves not only as providers of social and economic services, but also as catalysts for citizen organizing and influence. They had also established strong links with a vast network of grassroots women who were ready to speak up in their village and in the policymaking arena. Their alliance enabled them to allocate resources to implement the advocacy plan.

### **What Are the Lessons?**

- Training and analysis with the NGO leaders and their community-based staff was an important component throughout the project. But it was only near the end that it became clear to everyone that the project was about democracy as a set of values, attitudes, and ways of relating rather than just about structures and procedures. In retrospect, it might have been better to begin with an intensive dialogue and reflection about the definition of politics, democracy, citizenship, gender, and women's rights.
- Beforehand, all of the community-based animators were trained in participatory discussion methodologies and were given a detailed guidebook to support them. Although the training and guidebook were insufficient to help them in the difficult task of facilitating focus groups, the process itself was valuable.

- While the partners recognized the importance of accurate documentation of the focus group discussions, there were not enough resources for rapporteurs or tape recorders, so rich information was lost, affecting accuracy.
- Organizational hierarchies, social attitudes, and traditional patterns of relating to the “beneficiaries” conflicted with the use of participatory methodologies. The NGO leaders did not feel it was worthwhile to train community-based staff, although this staff ran most of the focus groups. The value of listening to local people was not recognized until the end of the project.
- Synthesizing and analyzing the raw focus group material into a set of priorities involved intensive behind the scenes work by a research expert with the NGO leadership; it proved to be a challenge for the NGO leaders to remain true to the voices of the grassroots women and resist overanalyzing and reinterpreting women’s statements. Conflicting approaches to handling the information tapped into deeply held values about the hierarchy of knowledge, reflecting the attitude that uneducated grassroots women know less than the educated, urban NGO staff about their own environment.
- Democracy language became a stumbling block in communication between the partners, GWIP, and the donor. Because the project was concerned more about recreating the practice and values of democracy in the context of a focused project as a step toward dealing with elections and legislation, it was tough to agree on measurements of success. Importantly, this case demonstrates that the process itself can be a valid measurement.

## Excerpts From the Benin Focus Group Facilitator's Guide

The community-based animators were trained in participatory methodologies and focus group techniques. They were given a 4-page guide with suggestions on how best to organize the discussion time for a group of 15 women. It suggested:

- Introductions - 30 minutes
- Brainstorming Session - 45 minutes
- Small Group Discussion - 45 minutes
- Report back to the larger group and discussion - 45 minutes
- Conclusion - 15 minutes

The Guide also gave tips about schedule and logistics, for example, setting a time that accommodates women's demands at home and in the field, arranging chairs in a circle, and having flipchart paper and markers handy. It noted that *"although not all of the women will be able to read, a visual record will validate what people are saying"*. The Guide lists some of the possible issues and problems women may mention, and encourages the facilitators to probe these areas:

- *"Safety: Do you feel your community is safe? Do you feel that there is safety in your family? . . .*
- *Health: Do you have problems finding a doctor or clinic to help you when you or your family are sick?*
- *Environment: Is it difficult to find wood for cooking? Why? Is garbage and sewage a problem?*
- *Infrastructure: Are the roads within your community in good condition? Is there easy access to other towns, markets, water? Are the bridges in your area safe?*
- *Family Life (relations): Are there any problems in families that affect life for women in this community? How are these problems perceived by men? By women? Are you familiar with the laws about marriage, children, etc.?*
- *Property: Do women own land or other property in your area? Why/why not? Do women inherit property when their husbands or fathers pass away?*
- *Work: What do women do for money? For food? How much time do domestic chores take most women?"*

The Guide also offers tips for building trust and confidence in a group, and tips on asking questions:

*"Remember that the women with whom we are discussing are the experts on their lives and the issues that they face. It is the facilitator's job to make them feel comfortable enough to speak their mind. . . . Ask questions in concrete terms. It is difficult to get the kind of information needed to develop the platform by asking abstract or theoretical questions, like 'tell me about the status of women'. The facilitators may want to give information that will help participants reflect about their own situation."*