Analysis of Learning Needs for Rural Development: Some Basic Issues

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ANALYSIS OF LEARNING NEEDS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT:
SOME BASIC ISSUES

by

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I. RURAL DEVELOPMENT - A PRIORITY TASK

One of the major problems being faced by developing countries throughout the world is concerned with the eradication of poverty, disease and backwardness from their rural areas. The task of transforming and modernizing rural societies is no doubt very difficult and complex, but at the same time a very urgent one, and should be given high priority in the overall plans and programmes of national development. This is because a much larger percentage of population in developing countries lives in rural areas compared to that in the developed countries. In some developing countries, especially in Africa and Asia, the rural population constitutes more than 75 per cent of the total population. Furthermore, of the population in developing countries considered to be in either absolute or relative poverty, more than 80% are estimated to live in rural areas. There are many other socio-economic and political factors that generate a pressing need for urgent action towards rural upliftment.

The arguments that have of late persuaded top politicians of developing countries as well as international policy-makers and planners for giving high priority to rural development are summarized by Chambers in four major points:

First, and most obviously, the majority, and usually the overwhelming majority, of the people live and find their livelihoods in the rural areas.

Second, the drift to the towns is a matter of concern. The high costs of urban housing and services, the health hazards of shanty towns, the security and political aspects of a large body of urban unemployed, and sometimes the adverse economic effects of rural depopulation - these are all reasons put forward for wishing to restrain urban growth; and one way of achieving this is seen to be the promotion of additional income and employment opportunities in rural areas.

Third, it is in the rural areas that most of the poorer and most disadvantaged people are to be found. ... They are precisely the people who are least in contact with the modern world, least influential politically, least likely to possess adequate land and capital for a decent life, least able to help themselves, and hardest for governments to help.
Fourth, there is a cluster of now orthodox economic arguments for giving priority to rural, and particularly agricultural, development. The strange errors of economists after the Second World War, with their belief in industrialization as the prime strategy for underdeveloped countries, have passed into history. The importance of self-sufficiency in food in order to save foreign exchange and to keep down urban wages; the need to develop crash crops in order to earn foreign exchange, particularly in those countries which lack minerals or oil for export; the existence of underexploited land and labour which can relatively easily be brought into production; the desirability of increasing rural purchasing power to provide markets for the new urban products - these are among the most persuasive economic reasons for the shift of priority towards agricultural development, reasons which seem unlikely to lose much of their force during the next decade and perhaps for much longer.

Role of Education

It is evident that the field of education has a crucial role to play in accomplishing the task of rural development. It is also clear that education by itself is not enough to tackle the vexed problems of rural areas, but it can act as one of the major factors in stimulating and sustaining the processes of development.

When viewed in this perspective, the present education scene in developing countries has been found to be far from being satisfactory. Critics have questioned the relevance and adequacy of the prevalent education systems in the context of specific learning needs of rural populations emerging from their local environments. As Coombs observed, "the incompatibility between what schools were teaching and what the people needed to learn was most severe in rural areas". As a result of such an incongruence between learning needs and education systems in rural areas, many serious problems have arisen. "In too many instances, children who finish primary schools in rural areas seem rather less fit to become creative and constructive members of their own community than if they had never been to school. ... In these circumstances, an educational system only too easily becomes an instigator of maladjustment and structural unemployment rather than an essential source of growth and development. The graduates of primary
school in Africa, or secondary school in Latin America, and of universities in India fail to find the employment which they expect. An irrelevant education breeds discontent and frustration in countries at all income levels. In the poorer countries, this problem weighs an ominous burden on the entire social structure.  

Such criticisms point to the fact that if education has to be made relevant and effective, specific learning needs in rural areas should be determined, and educational plans and programmes be based on these needs. Furthermore, if education is to be made adequate to the task of rural development its scope cannot be confined to schooling only, but should be extended to the whole population: children, youth and adults - without ignoring women or the most disadvantaged pockets of populations living in absolute poverty. Such broad meaning of education will include open, flexible and alternative learning arrangements through formal, non-formal and informal learning systems. Ideally, a need-based education system should generate learning in individuals, their families, neighbourhood, and community as a whole according to the common as well as differentiated needs of rural people.

How can learning needs be determined? Who should determine them? How can they be used for educational planning, for reforming the content and process of education, and for evaluating the quality of educational outcomes? These and other such issues call for a systematic investigation in order to make education in rural areas meaningful, functional and relevant to the local realities. The present paper attempts to discuss some of these issues in the light of a proposed research project. The immediate purpose of the project is to obtain a clearer understanding about the ways and means of identifying and fulfilling learning needs in rural areas. It has therefore been proposed to mount a few case studies of selected innovations that have attempted to tackle, either directly or otherwise, some of the critical problems and issues mentioned above. The case studies will be exploratory in nature and will attempt to describe and analyse pertinent experiences with a view to drawing tentative generalizations for further research and related activities. This paper discusses several elements that are relevant to the proposed case studies.
II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to establish a basis for analysing different cases and inter-relating varied experiences with a view to drawing tentative conclusions, a basic framework clarifying certain assumptions and relationships would be necessary. The framework should be somewhat open and flexible for an exploratory study like the present one. It should however initiate a process of clarifying the concept of learning needs and identifying various assumptions underlying the learning needs approach to education for rural development. A broad and general skeleton of the framework is given on page 5 in a diagramatic form for the purpose of indicating major interactive relationships among different elements related to the concept of learning needs. (See diagram on page 5)

It is not intended to discuss in detail different components of the framework in this paper. However, certain assumptions, definitions and relationships are briefly summarized below as a starting point towards the elucidation of various theoretical and practical issues concerning learning needs.

(i) The genesis of learning needs lies in the societal and physical (or natural) environments in which the individual lives, and with which he interacts and learns, and of which he himself is a part. The societal environment includes political structures and processes, economic and productive activities, interpersonal relationships and social organisations, cultural stock of human knowledge and skills including science and technology, communication systems, transport systems and so forth. Correspondingly, the physical environment includes land, soil, topography, climatic conditions, vegetation, other living organisms, water resources, minerals, etc.

(ii) Developments in societal environment, and efforts towards harnessing and controlling physical environment - all aimed at the improvement of the conditions and quality of life of individuals and their collectives are at the root of learning needs.
Development and Education

Development Needs and Resources

Determination of Learning Needs for Development

Educational Planning for Fulfilment of Learning Needs

Implementation and Evaluation of Educational Programmes

Life and Learning

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Individual (also the learner)</th>
<th>Environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
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Development of individuals, their collectives and their environments

- Personal, social, economic, political, cultural, moral

- Development in relation to the individual, family, community, country, larger society

Development goals and resources in relation to rural areas

Learning needs in rural areas

- Locale, Clientele, Credibility, Specificity

Educational planning for the fulfilment of learning needs in rural areas

Learning systems in rural areas - formal, non-formal, informal

Curriculum planning, learning processes and evaluation

(Similar stages for urban areas. The corresponding cells will have an intimate and interactive relationship, and will be integral parts of an overall design for national development and education.)
(iii) All these aspects of development are not directly under the area of operation of education. It is therefore implicit in the learning needs approach (to educational planning and programming) that appropriate connections with different fields of development and corresponding personnel be established, and that techniques of deriving learning needs from development goals be evolved and applied. It follows that various development activities in a rural area be inter-connected, and learning needs be co-operatively derived. The inter-connection or 'integration' among different fields is likely to be incremental in nature in the initial stages of development efforts. It may become more comprehensive as development efforts mature.

(iv) Whereas the initial parts of the diagram indicate extra-educational domain, the latter parts are related to processes and structures within the domain of education. Viewed in this perspective, the process of determining learning needs provides a mechanism for transition from one domain to the other.

(v) Learning needs of individuals or groups refer to the perceived discrepancy between the existing and the expected knowledge, attitudes and skills in the context of an intended development.

The terms knowledge, attitudes and skills as used here are generic in meaning and they characterize learning at different levels in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.

The kind of development goals in view may either be concrete, visible and yielding immediate returns or be less visible, diffused and having long-range effects. Again the intended development may belong to a single sector such as agriculture or may be a multi-sectoral one cutting across several areas such as nutrition, agriculture and non-farm occupations. In all such cases, learning needs indicate those elements of human competencies that are considered necessary for a certain development goal but are absent in a concerned individual or group.
(vi) In a given rural area, although some learning needs may be common for all, others may differ from group to group and even among individuals within a group. Moreover, the learning needs will change from time to time depending on different development needs. The greater the incidence of new development activities in a given field, the more frequent will be the need for new learning. Moreover, learning needs in one field when fulfilled may generate further learning needs and development possibilities in other fields.

(vii) Learning needs vary with locale and clientele. One of the most important factors in the determination of learning needs in rural areas is the local environment - both natural and societal. Learning needs emerging from the regional, national and global forces may be partly common and partly different from the local learning needs. In the ultimate analysis, both local and other learning needs should be taken into account for harmonious development. Similarly learnings of children, youth and adults are partly common and partly different. Differences in learning needs arise from personal, social, occupational and other characteristics of individuals or groups.

(viii) When the general as well as professional learning needs are assessed and weighed against the resources available, critical and urgent development needs, and similar factors, it will be necessary to determine priorities for the purposes of planning and implementation programmes.

(ix) This approach anticipates decentralization of planning and implementation procedures. Participation of the learner in identifying learning needs is another important pre-requisite for establishing credibility and acceptance of the programme.

(x) Learning needs should be functional in that they should prove useful to different groups of people for different purposes. The main users of the information on learning needs are political leaders and policy makers, educational planners, curriculum developers, and teachers/animators and learners. To ensure the usability of the statements of learning needs, they should be worked out at 2 or 3 levels of specificity.
(xi) Educational planning that is geared to the identification and fulfilment of specific learning needs for rural development will not only anticipate decentralization of decision-making and participation of local personnel but also call for the adoption of a broader conception of education, curriculum and learning processes. The meaning of education will not be narrowly restricted to schooling but will include all formal, non-formal and informal learning systems and flexible learning arrangements. Different learning needs will become the responsibility of different as well as alternative delivery systems. Depending on the characteristics of the clientele and the nature of learning needs, appropriate learning arrangements can be made and corresponding structures instituted on a short-term or long-term basis. There should be horizontal integration (or at least close co-ordination) and vertical articulation between different delivery systems so that they interact with one another and share resources which are indeed scarce in developing countries.

(xii) The techniques of curriculum planning for formal education will have to be extended to and adapted for non-formal programmes of many kinds. For the formal school education itself techniques of preparing local variants from a nationally designed curriculum framework will become necessary. This will include common curricula responding to the common national and universal learning needs as well as adaptation of certain aspects in order to align them with local environments.

(xiii) A kind of community curriculum that invisibly but consistently operates in rural areas and contributes to the development of certain attitudes, skills and knowledge for both general and occupational aspects of life will be required to be carefully analysed and understood. Advantage of such a strongly rooted community learning system can be taken by making some modifications in it for the fulfilment of certain learning needs at low cost. Learning needs approach favours the establishment of community education centres in rural areas.

(xiv) As an integral part of curriculum planning, different learning styles and modes need to be considered in the context of different learning needs. A model of learning modes may include (a) individualized learning and (b) group learning. The individualized learning may be further classified into (i) self-learning, and (ii) guided learning.
Similarly, group learning, may be further categorized into (i) teacher-directed or guided group learning, and (ii) inter-learning. The process of inter-learning is very common in informal learning systems in rural areas because of the higher frequency of person-to-person contact among peer groups as well as cross-age groups. Inter-learning can also be profitably utilized in the formal and non-formal situations. Both inter-learning and self-learning are likely to sustain and generate further motivation and confidence among rural populations for continuing learning. Different learning systems will have to be examined in relation to alternative learning modes, communication systems and learning aids for the fulfilment of varied learning needs with minimum investment of time, personnel and monetary resources.

(xv) Evaluation of educational outcomes will be an important dimension in the learning needs approach for the appraisal of relevance and effectiveness of the need-based education system. Statements of learning needs will provide 'internal' and immediate criteria for evaluation, whereas development goals will provide 'external' indicators which may anticipate either immediate or long range effects of education. Such a procedure would be an improvement over the existing evaluation system and should provide information about the relevance and effectiveness of education for rural developments.

III. LEARNING NEEDS AND THEIR DETERMINATION

The previous sections have set the general framework for the study and have provided an introduction to the larger issues of development and society. Working from larger societal goals, and then from development objectives, a process has been sketched out which allows educational planners and curriculum framers to derive some of the major learning needs from broader goals. These procedures provide the framework within which planning must take place, setting economic and political limits to the range of alternatives which can be considered at regional, local, and community levels. These same development goals set policy for the activities of various other agencies involved in health, agriculture, and transportation. The development of educational needs and goals must be seen in the context of these complementary activities in any given location.
The process of working downward from national goals and plans has predominated in educational planning procedures for some time. Deriving educational goals in this way is sometimes known as a 'top-down approach'. Increasingly in recent years, questions and criticisms have been raised about the resultant educational activities. Curricula and teaching methods are felt by some to be inappropriate to the setting or to the needs of many learners in rural areas. The content and style of education is seen as alienating learners from their society and the life they will have to lead. Others charge that schools increase the likelihood that people will migrate to urban areas and seek employment in the modern sector. In short, many question the relevance of the educational activities which have resulted from the top-down planning approach.

This dissatisfaction has resulted in the development of an alternative approach to planning which could be termed a 'bottom-up approach.' Proponents of this method, sometimes called participatory planning or a community development approach, argue that educational planning must start with the needs of the learner and his community. Only at this level is there sufficient knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of the local setting to provide statements of the local learning needs. Clear statements of needs by the learners are also needed to counteract errors and misperceptions of local learning needs held by planners and education officials who lack first-hand experience in the locale. But there remains many unresolved questions about methodology and about the feasibility of assessing learning needs in a way which will permit them to be integrated into the larger policies articulated at the national level.

Why Assess Learning Needs?

The need to assess learning needs arises directly from the questions which have been raised about the relevance of current educational practices. Lack of relevance suggests either ineffective progress toward desired goals, or inappropriate goals, or perhaps both. For educational planning, particularly for rural areas, the problem seems to derive from the lack of a process to clearly articulate appropriate educational goals. Attempts to derive learning needs more directly from national and regional development goals provides one way of assuring greater relevance. Another is to look more
closely at the question of "Who defines learning needs?". Does the learner play any part in either stating the learning needs of assessing their relevance to him and his life? In most settings the answer to these questions is clear: there are only limited attempts to seek out the learner's point of view.

Part of the issue of relevance, of course, is the oft-debated question about the role of education in society. Should its major thrust be one of socialization of new citizens to 'fit' into the existing social setting? Or should the focus of education be more developmental; teaching skills and attitudes designed to change the structure of society? All educational systems are in reality a mixture of these two components, although the relative proportion of the components vary considerably. In many African countries today, a reassessment has begun of the effects of educational systems which focus heavily on the development of new societies. Some of the costs are becoming apparent, and dialogue is taking place about what to preserve of the old cultures. In this perspective the issue of relevance is really a debate about the rate of change of society, and whose priorities should be followed in determining the characteristics of the new society?

In thinking about learning needs, a step which is often overlooked involves the assessment of the knowledge and skills which the learners already possess. This is particularly true of adult learners, or of school-age children in out-of-school situations. One of the sources of confusion in assessing learning needs is the distinction between having intellectual or conceptual knowledge, and being able or willing to utilize that knowledge. Ministry level planners often assume that because health or agricultural practices are not efficient or effective, that the cause is a lack of knowledge, and therefore the remedy is education to meet this learning need. In fact, recent studies are beginning to suggest that in many cases the knowledge is present, but there are a wide variety of cultural and practical reasons why this knowledge has not been applied. This aspect should be kept in view in any project of identifying and fulfilling learning needs.
Sources of Learning Needs

Learning needs arise because of the perception on someone's part that learners need a level of skill, knowledge, or attitude which is greater than that which they now have. Such needs may arise as the result of several processes. In some cases, such as basic educational needs, they may be the result of failure to learn from an opportunity which existed. For instance a learner who attended school or a trade training course but was unable to benefit from the learning setting. Much more common though, is the case of learners for whom access to the learning opportunity was not available. Such a learner will have achieved a variety of skills and knowledge through informal socialization procedures and self-learning, but will likely have difficulty if called upon to work or live in a changing setting. Finally, there are also learning needs which result from new activities, new modes of production, or moves to a more modern setting. In such situations, nearly all people will have the need to learn new skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to cope with the demands of a changed situation.

Learning needs are created as a result of mankind's need to solve a series of problems which are common to most human beings. All people must acquire the social, cultural, moral, and political knowledge required to be functional members of the society in which they live. Likewise everyone must solve problems relating to personal health; to the production, storage, and consumption of food; to the construction and maintenance of shelter; and to the need to participate in specialized crafts or occupations. These common problems produce learning needs which are common to members of a society who live in a similar ecological setting.

In addition to the common needs, there are also a great variety of learning needs which are differentiated according to a variety of factors relating to the individual learner, to the local village or town setting, and to the ecological or regional setting. Wet lowland areas where cultivation of rice is the basic activity will have substantially different needs than areas where pastoral or nomadic animal husbandry is the norm. Social, linguistic, and cultural needs will be different according to the ethnic group being discussed. And of course there will be a variety of individual needs, depending on the age, sex, status, and role of the individual. Individual needs will also vary according to personal ambitions, opportunities, and inherent abilities.
With a reasonable level of knowledge about the characteristics of the setting and the types of learners being discussed, one can predict the learning needs which would fall into one or another category. Thus women of child-bearing age would have one set of needs specific to them, while men who were heads of families and of various kinds of production units would have another set. Broad typologies of learning needs derived in this way are fairly common in the literature on education in rural areas.

One of the earliest examples in the African setting can be found in the reports of the Phelps-Stokes Commissions in the 1920s. They recommend four basic educational areas: health, home life, agriculture and industrial skill, and recreation. These basics were to permeate the teaching of all subjects and were to be taught within the context of a basic sense of community-consciousness. A surprisingly parallel list is found nearly fifty years later in the essential minimum learning needs listed by Coombs: basic education - literacy and numeracy; family improvement education; community improvement education; and occupational education. Other authors and international commissions have produced similar lists. Such categories are useful in setting the general framework for rural learning needs, but all require further work towards greater specificity that would make them operational, and the criteria for making choices as to what aspects to stress in what locations. Assessing local relevance requires inputs from people who live in the area and are part of the social and political communities there.

Already it seems clear from the discussion that learning needs can and have been articulated by a wide variety of people at different levels in the planning process. Yet, to date most efforts to articulate learning needs seem to have come from national or even international level experts attempting to draw up large scale plans. While there is growing agreement on the need to get more statements of learning needs as perceived by local and community level sources, there remains many unanswered technical questions about how to proceed.
Techniques for Assessing Learning Needs

Before proceeding to a brief discussion of some of the existing techniques for identifying learning needs, several issues need to be raised.

Issues in Assessing Learning Needs

Perhaps the most important conceptual issue, lies in the need to understand learning needs as the difference between existing skills, knowledge and attitudes and a new level of competence required by a new situation or an increased set of individual or community aspirations. Kenneth King has carried out field studies in Kenya and written several documents which express well the need to conduct an inventory of existing skills in rural populations. He stresses the need for a realistic assessment of the full range of skills derived from primary school experience. Even more importantly he emphasizes the need to do an assessment of the skills and knowledge generated by the out-of-school experiences. These include the whole range of activities from family life, to food production, to local craftwork, to construction, and for older children apprenticeship-type experiences. Many educators have a tendency to assume that since these kinds of topics are not part of the school curriculum, that the children have no work or life experience. As he shows, this is far from the case.10

Any realistic assessment of learning needs must include a systematic process to obtain a reasonable inventory of existing skills. This inventory then provides the basis for assessing the degree of new learning represented by the target learning needs. In the past skill inventories have been limited almost exclusively to the type of school-based subject matter readily measured by standardized examinations. For rural audiences particularly, this has often led to an underestimate of their actual skills and knowledge, and consequently, in some cases to inappropriate design of curriculum.

A second issue involves the difference between needs and wants. Questioning the average rural learner about his or her learning needs is most likely to elicit a statement of short-term wants: "I want to be able to sign my name so I won't have to make a thumbprint... I want my children to go to primary school and I can't afford to send them... I want to be able to figure out the correct price for my crops so I won't be
cheated." One can then derive apparent learning needs from these wants, but the statements can be deceiving. A common assumption about the man who wants to sign his name would be that he desires literacy. In fact, he really may just want to be able to sign his name so he won't be embarrassed when confronted with an official document. For that learner, being able to read the document may not now be a perceived need, although the planner can argue reasonably that he does in fact need to be able to read. The learner may respond that he is "too old and cannot learn - such things are for his children."

The basic point underlying the needs/wants issue is really the question of who is going to make the determination of the learning needs. Each learner will do so in the context of his or her sense of achievable personal goals, and in terms of their understanding of the problems which they face. For many rural people, and a number of planners as well, literacy is not seen as a priority need since they do not see any direct practical linkage with their present or likely future life. Over a period of time, working in a learning group, or being involved in a community development process, learners may come to better understand the forces influencing their lives, and consequently change their learning goals. Unfortunately most easily used techniques for measuring learning needs involve only a short, one-time interaction with a sample of learners and do not provide the time for a gradual growth process in the learner's perception of their situation. As a result, educators may tend to fill in the gaps according to their perspectives on what is needed.

A third general issue arises from the reality of governmental structures in any part of the world. Any programme to assess needs is usually undertaken within the context of a particular agency or ministry. There is therefore a natural tendency to seek out and find learning needs of the kind that their agency is charged with meeting. Particularly in the absence of articulate statements from the learners, those doing the survey are likely to conclude that the programme they had in mind from the beginning is the appropriate one. This tendency is reinforced by the administrative need for advance planning and budgeting, and by the understandable fear of governments of the consequences of stimulating demand.
for services which cannot be provided. Hence, the more common practice is to decide to upgrade certain services and to plan the delivery system prior to making any extensive effort to contact the potential users of those services.

Criteria for Selecting Techniques

The selection of a technique for assessing the learning needs can have a significant effect on the resultant needs statement. The issue of how you assess needs is unavoidably associated with the selection of the source of information on learning needs. Techniques appropriate for school teachers or ministry officials will be quite inappropriate with illiterate parents and villagers, for instance. All too often educators are placed in the position of allowing the convenience of a particular methodology to severely limit the sources of information used. There is a strong tendency to use standardized testing or questionnaire type formats because of their ease of manipulation, and consequently being limited to literate respondents, and often being effectively limited to respondents who are already members of conveniently available groups like school classes or teacher organizations.

In addition to the serious limitations placed on the diversity of sources by such approaches, they all too easily lend themselves to a spurious sense of numerical accuracy. In order to facilitate processing of the results, answers are given numbers representing scale points, and statistical procedures are used to analyse the results. While there are settings where such techniques are appropriate, they are arguably inappropriate for a process of exploring learning needs of rural illiterate populations. In fact, one can probably say that the closer the assessment process gets to the actual learners, the less appropriate standardized procedures and statistical analysis will be.

Particularly in the early stages of such an inquiry methods should be chosen which lend themselves to getting information in depth rather than in breadth. Individual case studies of learners or of learning communities which use a variety of techniques to put together a holistic and complete picture of the needs are most appropriate. The goal is to see and understand the environment from the perspective of the learners, using their cultural lenses and their perceptions of what constitutes
a meaningful life. When possible, actual expressions should be preserved, and attempts should be made to leave the data in the vernacular rather than translate it into the national language. Any process which modifies their perspective or filters it through the lenses of a person who is not of that environment runs the risk significant distortion.

In this respect, some care should be taken in selecting the personnel who are going to actually carry out the assessment process. Typically one employs people with research backgrounds from the central ministry, or university level students. Yet, such people are often far removed from the life and culture of the local region, and can unintentionally introduce bias into the results. There is also a very strong tendency for rural learners to respond to outsiders by giving them the replies which the learners' feel are wanted, rather than expressing themselves freely. This latter behaviour is even more pronounced when language issues intervene, requiring translations from the vernacular to the national language, and can also result from the interference due to regional dialects. Thus, whenever possible personnel should be chosen from the same communities as the learners, and with minimal status differences between them and the learners being surveyed.

A diversified set of sources of information should be used. If there is imbalance, arguments can be advanced for placing emphasis on the learners or sources close to them. Typically, the pattern has been the reverse, largely because of the difficulty of getting articulate statements of needs out of learners. In selecting a technique, careful attention needs to be paid to the level of awareness of the learner, since that will strongly influence the ways in which he or she is able to express needs. Unsophisticated learners are likely to express needs as problem statements about situations in their lives. Their perceptions of needs will be strongly conditioned by their understanding of the forces which shape their lives. In many cases, needs will only emerge after dialogue, discussion and a growth process which may take some time. How such a process can be incorporated into a larger needs assessment remains to be tackled. Planners should realize though that inputs from such processes are a valuable part of the needs profile of an area, and should thus make every attempt to access such sources.
Another type of source often overlooked can be found in local development projects, which may have no overt educational component. Projects like large-scale irrigation, or the introduction of major new crops or growing processes, will in fact have significant learning implications. Methodologies must be developed to access these predictable new learning needs by projecting into the future. In addition, changes in the environment may bring about increased awareness of options, and in turn generate demands for the learning needed to take advantage of these options. In such situations, awareness must be generated, and dialogues and discussions carried out before needs can be fully articulated.

Techniques for Assessing Learning Needs

This section contains a brief discussion of some of the basic approaches which can be used to assess needs. Many of the issues raised by the use of one or another of them have been discussed in the previous section. The list is incomplete, and some energy needs to be devoted to seeking out or creating other alternatives which will be more effective in rural settings.

Questionnaires. This very common technique is useful primarily where large samples are needed and only after extensive exploratory efforts have clarified basic need structures. Questionnaires should be used sparingly, and with care. They are susceptible to interpreter bias, particularly since the people doing the analysis and interpretation of results are almost always several steps removed from direct experience with the learners and other sources of information. The results of questionnaire analysis should really be understood as the planner's interpretation of the needs as expressed by the sources. Questionnaires have the advantage of standardizing the form of the questions asked, of facilitating control of the process, and of insuring comparable coding of the resulting answers. These characteristics account for their considerable popularity as a methodology. There are many drawbacks though. In multi-language situations, the interpretation of the questions by the respondents may be heavily influenced by the phrasing, or by the translation into a new language. Responses may be strongly conditioned by the setting in which questions are answered. These limitations often outweigh the advantages generated by the apparent controllability of questionnaires, and may severely limit the validity of the results.
Interviews. The interview is probably the most useful technique available for assessing learning needs especially where the percentage of illiteracy is very high. There are several types of interviews: those that are primarily closed and those that are primarily open in their structure. In reality most interviews are a mixture of 'lead' questions to be followed by 'probing' questions, and open-ended questions where the respondent is encouraged to talk freely. For initial assessment of learning needs a very open structure is desirable. When going into a new area, the process should almost be one of open conversation, perhaps with small groups of respondents. Gradually there will emerge from these conversations themes and needs which can then form the basis for constructing a more structured set of questions. Even after proceeding to the more structured interview instrument, care should be taken to maintain open sections, and interviewers should operate so as to encourage spontaneous expression of other needs not included in the questions.

As in the case of the questionnaires, there remains the considerable problem of convincing the respondents that one is genuinely interested in their viewpoints and does not want answers designed to please the interviewer. The relationship of the interviewer to the respondents is thus crucial. Care should be taken to select interviewers who are close to the respondents' cultural and social group, and to establish sufficient legitimacy and rapport before proceeding to the questions.

Life-Skill Inventories. A variation on the questionnaire or interview method involves the use of a list of life-skills objectives. In effect, such a list provides a series of skill areas from which an individual or community can select those felt to be relevant to their setting. To make such a selection effectively, the respondent needs to be able to envision the future setting for his or her community. What kind of a life do they desire? What means of production will be used, and what kind of social and cultural structure will be present. On the basis of these ideas, the respondent can then select and prioritize the desired life-skills objectives.
This process has the advantage of presenting respondents with a wide range of alternatives, and thereby stimulating them to consider a greater range of possibilities than they would if merely asked about learning needs. Such a list also provides the opportunity for an interactive process where the respondents can discuss alternatives and more fully understand the implications of their choices. Such a process is likely to provide a much better indicator of learning desires than questionnaires or interviews used with individuals.

Group Processes. This approach might equally be called the 'community development model.' The essence of this process is an activity sequence of listening, of promoting discussion and then facilitating analysis of the problems mentioned by the people. Initially, the task is one of establishing rapport and building some legitimacy for the presence and role of the person collecting the information. After this initial period, people will begin to express concern about problems in their lives or in the village. After a while, the person assessing learning needs can help people move from general discussion of their complaints to a more analytic process of identifying the sources of the difficulties, and what some of the remedial procedures might be. During this latter phase learning needs will become clear either on an implicit or sometimes on an explicit basis.

Such a process is of course time consuming, and requires field workers with some skill and experience. On the other hand the information which is produced may be of considerable value to the planner in assessing the state of the village and the kinds of learning needs which are currently seen as appropriate by the villagers. Such a process has the further advantage of creating motivation and commitment on the part of the potential learning community. In the ideal setting the process of articulating needs, motivating learners, and implementing a learning process would all be integrated into the same framework.

In most situations the selection of techniques for assessing learning needs will not mean choosing only one of the above methods. A well implemented process will use several of these techniques in succession, moving from open-ended exploratory procedures to more systematic and focused methods as the study progresses. The actual methods used will depend heavily on the time, the staff, and the resources available to carry out the assessment.
Typically these are all in short supply, and some thought should be given to developing effective methods to be used in situations of limited time and resources.

**Verification of Learning Needs.** A final step which is frequently omitted but should not be, requires that the final drafting of the list of learning needs be checked for validity and acceptability with the potential learners. Many changes occur between the initial process of collecting data, and the writing of the final report of needs. Not infrequently in this process, changes of content or emphasis occur which render the result quite different from the true needs of the learners. Only a process which includes this final verification procedure will be truly useful.

**Level of Detail in Specifying Learning Needs**

There remains an important issue in the communication of learning needs produced by the techniques described above. The issue can be best stated as a question: "With how much detail should the learning needs be described?". There are several criteria which are useful in deciding on the most effective level of detail. The first concerns the audience for whom the document is intended, and the second depends on the application which that audience has in mind. To facilitate the discussion of the alternatives a suggested three-stage typology is outlined below.

**Specification Level 1 (SL₁).** This level is intended for communication with general as well as educational policy makers and planners on both a national and an international level. The statements of needs are still general and close to the development goals, but have been transformed from problem statements, to indications of general areas of learning. Examples of this level would include the need for more learning in the area of family health, or in occupational skill areas. Such a level of detail would serve to differentiate between the responsibilities of various ministries, or their counterpart divisions within international agencies.

**SL₂.** This level of detail will most likely be found among central and regional level educational and curriculum planners. It is used to make decisions about the allocation of various learning tasks to various educational institutions, and to make decisions about what level of education will be given primary responsibility for particular content. For instance, should the
teaching of the scientific principles underlying good health practices be put in the primary school curriculum, or be placed in the secondary schools to coincide with more advanced science training? Should basic occupational skills be located in the school curriculum, or should they be taught in non-school settings such as apprenticeship systems? Learning needs at SL2 are specific enough to be clear about focus and level of learning involved, but stop short of clearly specified objectives which characterize the last level.

SL3. This is the most detailed level which is normally restricted to the instructional setting at the actual point of learning. Typically this means the teacher who is drawing up detailed plans of work for classroom activities. However, it may include curriculum planners who are charged with creating the syllabus for a particular subject. In either case, the learning needs will be specified down to the level of the explicit component skills and knowledge which are to be covered in each unit of the curriculum. The use of SL3 will depend on the situation in a particular country. In some this level will only be reached by the teacher in the actual learning situation, while in others it will also be used at curriculum development centres.

Choosing the level at which to specify learning needs thus requires the planner to be clear about the purpose for which the needs are being written, and to whom the communication is going to be addressed. In some cases documents may contain several levels, beginning with more general statements and then proceeding to more specific ones in later parts or in attached appendices.

Locus of Control of the Needs Assessment Process

A little-discussed but very basic issue in the learning needs assessment process concerns the distribution of decision-making power. Perhaps the most basic way of stating the issue can be found in the question: "To what extent are the learners or their representatives effectively present during the final decision-making process about learning needs?". How the learners are represented at higher levels depends on several factors. Usually there is some sort of appointed or chosen representative who is presumed to speak for the people. Yet closer analysis may often reveal that such a person was appointed by a higher authority and is basically responsible to that
authority and not to the villagers. More rarely, a representative group of learners is sought out at each stage of the process, and the final listing of learning needs is a result of their direct participation. Unfortunately though, for reasons of time and convenience there is often no representation of the learners in the decision-making process.

One way of analysing this problem is to conceive of the decision-making process as involving three groups: the central decision makers, the technical group, and the learners. The technical group, upon instructions from the decision makers, serves as the main locus of activity. They design, carry-out, analyze, and write up the results of the needs assessment process. Their final document is technically in the form of a recommendation to the decision makers. In many cases the report is accepted as is with little or no modification. In other cases, overriding political considerations may result in substantial alteration of the report. The learning group may be represented in some way in the technical group, either by having actual representatives, or by being consulted at various stages in the process. However, it is quite rare that any real decision-making power is vested in the learning group, even in terms of the decision of what to include in the recommendations of the technical group.

The issue of who participates in and controls the assessment process is crucial, because the results depend very strongly on whose perceptions of the learners' needs are going to dominate. The learners' perceptions are likely to be limited in time and scope. The tendency for technical personnel is to decide, in the face of 'inadequate statements of needs' provided by the learners, that the planners must step in and include those needs which they feel are necessary for the learners. In short, the planners' perspective is chosen as being the apropriate one for the learners. The planners easily justify this substitution by saying that the learners don't have enough education to know what is good for them.

However, the impact of these decisions is going to fall largely on the villagers, not on the planners or their families in the capital city. Consider the impact of policies on family planning education, decisions about the language of instruction and examination, or the decision to ruralize the curriculum. Whose lives and communities will bear the burden of the impact? In many cases, learners do have a reasonable understanding
of some of these implications, and precisely for that reason choose learning needs which they feel are more compatible with their preferred life style. The resolution of conflicts between locally perceived needs, and those perceived by planners and politicians from other levels of society presents a continuing dilemma, and a source of conflict over who is going to set priorities for the learners.

IV. IN CONCLUSION

It is clear from the previous sections that the techniques of assessing learning needs and a variety of assumptions underlying them call for a careful analysis and research. Once the learning needs are clearly identified as an integral part of the planning process, they will generate a number of ideas and implications for delivery systems, curriculum planning, evaluation and other components of the education system operating at the local and other levels. Moreover, as an integral part of the process of educational planning and curriculum revision, the task of assessing learning needs is continuous and cyclic. Appropriate tools and procedures need to be evolved for the purpose of carrying out such assessment.

Once again, the issue of who makes these decisions and the amount of participation which the learners have in the process can have important implications for the probability of success. Having local people actively involved in making choices of delivery modes can avoid unrealistic plans and costly mistakes right from the beginning. They, better than anyone else, know what motivates the learners, what kinds of hardship learners are willing to bear, and what learning processes will be most congenial. To plan without this level of input is to remove one of the most valuable sources of information from the process.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


6. For further details, see working draft document S39/1 (IIEP, Paris) on General Design for Case Studies prepared by R.H. Dave.


8. PHELPS-STOKES Reports on Education in Africa, abridged with an introduction by LEWIS, L.J., London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 50. The following pages present a discussion of methods for meeting the needs. Many of the approaches would still be relevant today. They also place heavy emphasis on religion and character development which today survives more in the form of national citizenship training.

9. COOMBS, P.H., op. cit., p. 15.


ALLES, J. "A First Step in the Identification of Learning Priorities." Paris: UNESCO, Notes, Comments ... N° 6, March 1975, p. 21 ff. Alles presents a general procedure and then in the appendices list of sample learning needs and a procedure for local communities to develop selected needs in more detail.

BROKENSHA, D. and HODGE, P., Community Development: An Interpretation San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1969, Chapter III presents a good summary of the basic community development strategy and methods.

One innovative approach to this problem has been developed and used extensively in rural Ecuador. The basic technique involves using a simple simulation game called "The Game of Life" which depicts the typical community setting. Players take roles and act out situations from their daily lives. In the process problems are brought out and discussion generates statements of needs. See for instance Evans, D.R. "The Ecuador Project." Amherst, Massachusetts: Center for International Education, Technical Note n° 1, 1972.