Conducting Community Assessments

Building a foundation for effective Rotary projects

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Why community assessments are important

Effective service projects need a solid foundation. Although clubs and districts invest a lot of time and money into various projects, some still don't make a lasting impact. A well-planned project that fits the community's culture and context is more likely to succeed, and conducting a thorough community assessment significantly increases your chances for success. An assessment can help you:

- **Understand the community.** Working with the community to understand its history, culture, strengths, assets, weaknesses, and needs through a broad assessment is an essential first step in planning an effective project. By scheduling enough time to gather input from and information about the community, you can discover the best opportunities for service and maximize your club's ability to bring about positive and lasting change. Even if you're actively involved in the community, an assessment can reveal a new way to address a known issue or give residents a chance to note overlooked challenges.

- **Make informed decisions.** Assessments provide data to guide your club and the community as you decide what project to do; how to allocate time, funding, and other resources; and what's the best way to collaborate with relevant local groups.

- **Build trust and community involvement.** Developing trust in communities can require time — in some cases, months or even years. Conducting an assessment is critical to building valuable relationships and engaging residents in the project, fostering a sense of commitment that will sustain the change.

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Why community assessments are important

A community assessment is much broader than needs or solutions. It should have the complete context about a community's culture, unity, divisions, and how decisions are made. Strive to include these topics, using the tools in this guide:

1. Daily life. Ask each group or person you interview what daily life is like. What are everyday tasks? How do they do them? What are the benefits of doing them that way? How do they wish things were different? (Include educational opportunities, jobs or income, health, nutrition, their physical environment and surroundings, cleanliness, personal safety, and more.)

2. What are the biggest issues in the community? What things cause anger, frustration, arguments, or an inability to achieve goals? What things prevent growth or achievement? How might they be addressed? What things bring joy, collaboration, cohesion, wellness, and productivity? Why do they work well?

3. What is the history of these issues?

   • What has the community (or groups in it) tried to do? What was the outcome?

   • What have nongovernmental organizations, universities, or other outside groups done? What was the outcome?

   • What have the local, regional, and central governments done or not done? What was the outcome?

   • Why do the issues persist?

   • Do colonialism, paternalism, old customs, traditions, and other long-lasting practices prevent change? Why does that still happen?

   • What can be done to remove these barriers, encourage reconciliation, or facilitate community harmony? What can be done to improve people's lifestyles or livelihoods, or make things better in other ways?

4. Who is in control of these issues or the underlying causes? Which people are not involved in leadership or discussions? Why?

5. Who are the most trusted leaders in the community (men, women, boys, and girls)?

6. How would advocacy with leaders or the government improve the issues?

7. What other changes would make the community and its members happier, healthier, and better off financially?

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Tips for conducting community assessments

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Rotary International is committed to creating environments that are diverse, inclusive, equitable, and beneficial to all in the community. All members and participants have a responsibility to uphold these principles. When you conduct a community assessment, be sure to engage people from traditionally underrecognized groups and build partnerships with a variety of groups in the community. By including people with a range of perspectives and welcoming them into the conversations and decisions, you'll help maintain an environment that aligns with Rotary's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Before the assessment

- **Ensure that the assessment is led by a local club or organization.** The host club's participation is critical to ensure a deep understanding of the community and help you build ongoing relationships. Even if the assessment is conducted by another local collaborator, make sure the local club is involved in or aware of the process.

- **Consider yourself an outsider.** Even if you live in the community where your club wants to do a project, find an individual, group, or organization that can introduce you to a variety of residents who will bring different experiences, perspectives, and ideas to the assessment process. Ask participants who else in the community they think you should speak with.

- **Choose participants carefully.** Conversations with a few people aren't enough to understand a community. Consider the composition of the community and be sure to include a representative cross-section of relevant groups (e.g., by gender, age, ethnicity, religion, income level, and vocation). Remember that you shouldn't include children in the assessment or ask them questions without their primary caregivers' consent, and you also need to comply with all of Rotary's policies for working with young people.

- **Include frequently marginalized groups.** Women, young people, older people, people with disabilities, and people from smaller religious and ethnic groups are often underrepresented. Think about the social dynamics of the community in deciding whom to meet with. Convene people from each group separately so they're more comfortable sharing their perspectives. When you schedule these meetings, consider what might prevent people from specific groups from attending, such as the accessibility of the location, financial considerations, gender roles, religious observances, or caregiver responsibilities.

- **Establish a data collection and monitoring system.** Determine what data is relevant for you to gather during the assessment. Many organizations and government entities collect community-level information and will share it with your project team. Seeking and using available data to supplement your own research will help your team better understand the community's priorities and the best approaches to address its needs. Also think carefully about how you'll measure impact and how to structure the data collection system to make it objective and impartial. Consider who will collect and receive the data and how community leaders, clubs, and partners might adapt the project or training if necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

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Tips for conducting community assessments

- **Manage expectations.** Make it clear that the assessment is exploratory and collaborative, and that your interest in working with the community is not a commitment to address a predefined issue. The benefits of partnering with Rotary and how the community will participate in, contribute to, and maintain the solution will be determined later in the planning process.

- **Understand the difference between a feasibility study and a community assessment.** A feasibility study is an analysis to determine the practicality of a proposed project. Avoid studying whether a specific solution or project would benefit the community. Instead, focus on understanding the community's main concerns and the underlying causes of those concerns — a community assessment.

- **Collaborate, don't duplicate.** In some cases, local governments, nongovernmental organizations, nearby clubs, or other civil society associations may be already studying the community or planning to address issues there. Make sure your assessment, and any subsequent projects, don't duplicate efforts. Investigate whether a collaboration could strengthen an existing community assessment or initiative.

- **Learn from what hasn't worked.** Remember to ask about what hasn't worked for the community in the past. If recent projects didn't meet their goals or address the issue they were intended to improve, find out why they didn't have the expected effect.

During the assessment

- **Go to the community.** Talk to people in the area where they live or work rather than asking them to travel to a location where they may be uncomfortable, concerned about safety, or incur transportation costs.

- **Listen without judgment.** Avoid assuming you know what's best for the community or what challenges it faces. Acknowledge your own cultural background and biases but try to suspend your preconceived ideas. Focus on listening, learning, and understanding other perspectives. Absorb information without forming conclusions or indicating any to those you speak with. Ask open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about…" or "How does [X] happen…?" Pay attention to the answers and ask follow-up questions to learn more.

- **Foster a safe environment for youth.** Young people can add valuable perspectives to community assessments and service projects when they feel safe and welcome. It's important for you and anyone else who works with young people

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through Rotary to make their safety your top priority. You need to obtain consent from a young person's primary caregiver for them to participate in any activity or project. Before engaging with minors, review Rotary's statement of conduct for working with youth at the beginning of the Rotary Youth Protection Guide and take the course in the Learning Center.

- **Craft a compelling narrative.** Structure data collection activities that create a natural flow of information for you and the community. The assessment tools you use should build on one another, making it easier to collect and analyze information. What will help you and your partners understand the community and help the community understand Rotary and its partners?

- **Communicate respectfully.** In all your communications about the assessment or a possible project, treat community members as active participants rather than passive recipients of the project benefits. Focus on their strengths, incorporate their perspectives and ideas into the process, and highlight community-driven solutions. Understanding the community, listening to the residents, and creating environments where they feel empowered is fundamental to the way we work with people.

- **Determine if an issue is a one-time problem or a recurring problem.** If it's recurring, find out why. Are existing laws or programs not being adhered to? Is there a need for training, data collection, or established processes? This broader approach investigates and seeks to address the underlying causes of an issue and could benefit the community you want to work with as well as others facing similar situations.

- **Emphasize community involvement.** Make it clear that you are interested in working with the community to address a local need and that the community will retain and maintain any result of that collaboration. Talk about the fact that any collaboration will involve long-term solutions led by diverse local representatives (including people from historically underrepresented groups). The community should lead every decision, with your club available to assist. This promotes local involvement and sustainability.

- **Create environments where people feel empowered.** Speak *with* community members, not at them, and find opportunities for them to be actively included in the project planning and decisions. Ensure that community partners are a central part of any initiative — not only during the assessment process, but also during implementation, evaluation, and the long-term sustainability of project activities.

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Consent and data privacy

It's important to remember that during the assessment process, you might be asking sensitive questions, collecting personal information, or conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups with people from vulnerable or underrepresented groups. Ensure that you have consent from each person to collect their information and that you have a secure method to keep their data private.

Consent means that the person answering questions is doing so by their choice and without coercion and understands how their answers may be used.

Data privacy means protecting the personal information that you collect and using it only for its original purpose.

Consider these questions about data privacy and consent:

- Do people know that they can decline to answer a question or stop participating at any time?
- If you're using a survey, will their names be linked to their responses or will answers be anonymous?
- Can the answers be connected to a specific person? If so, could it cause them harm?
- Where will you store the survey responses or notes from your interviews and focus groups? When and how will you delete the data after it's no longer needed?
- Who will have access to the data?
- Will any results be shown about specific individuals or only at the group level?
- Is the data you are collecting necessary and relevant?

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Examples of community assessments in action

Example 1

A Rotary club in Roatán, Honduras, wanted to work with people in St. Helene, an island 45 minutes away by boat. Club members were interested in collaborating with the people in St. Helene to improve sanitation, strengthen their economy, implement access to safe water and electricity, improve educational outcomes, and address widespread health issues. The club invited residents in St. Helene to take part in a community assessment so it could learn about the local priorities.

The Roatán club members started by organizing a community meeting. Although many people attended, St. Helene's council members did most of the talking. Others, including parents and local elders, sat in the back and nodded. Club members noticed that most of the community members didn't share their opinions at the meeting, so they scheduled smaller focus groups with residents that didn't include the council members. Some people echoed the concerns of the council, but they also mentioned other issues. In the focus group, they were honest about their struggles and the lack of opportunity for themselves and their children.

The club organized a community mapping activity to further understand different perspectives and get feedback from more people. Participants drew local maps and highlighted the places that were most important to them. The school was important to people with children, and the clinic was important to almost everyone. This activity helped residents talk about what they did and didn't have and prioritize their interests. The Rotary members asked about previous efforts to address these priorities, and residents explained what was done, how it failed, why a new idea was better, and how they could maintain it. This process shaped a shared understanding of the community and future service efforts.

As a result of the assessment, residents in St. Helene have collaborated with Rotary members on a series of water, sanitation, and hygiene projects at the locations that the community mapped to be the most accessible and visited. Locally made hand washing stations were placed in multiple locations, with health workers and locally influential people hosting learning sessions every two weeks until proper hand washing behavior became a habit. A schedule is in place for latrine cleaners, followed by inspections, to ensure that the new latrines are inviting, well-maintained, and used properly. Two residents gather data on the current condition of every latrine and hand washing station. Village leaders, health officials, and local club members can then review the information to ensure the facilities are being properly maintained.

The club continues to work with the St. Helene community and involve international club partners to understand the community's evolving priorities through follow-up assessments and projects in which residents develop solutions based on their shared needs.

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Examples of community assessments in action

Example 2

Rotary clubs in Italy learned during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic that projects cannot succeed solely on good intentions. A well-planned project involves the community and is based on residents' input and priorities.

In 2020, many clubs in Italy's Romagna region reacted quickly to the pandemic out of a desire to help COVID patients and local health care systems. The clubs inundated local hospitals with donations, including materials like oximeters and thermometers. The donations quickly piled up. Although the members wanted to help, it was clear that already overwhelmed hospitals were now overloaded with unused medical supplies and burdened with sorting through the donations that — although generous — they didn't need or couldn't use.

Recognizing that this approach was creating more problems, the clubs decided to change their focus. With the district's support, more than a dozen clubs from Romagna formed a task force with health care experts, government officials, patients, residents, and community leaders to identify how the Rotary clubs could support local priorities during the public health emergency.

As part of its assessment, the task force consulted with relevant groups such as public health officials, technicians, doctors, nurses, health service managers, community members, and Rotary members who had expertise in the health sector to understand local needs. The assessment found an overlooked vulnerability: chronically ill cardiology patients lacked access to crucial heart monitoring systems because of lockdown restrictions and COVID priorities. The clubs formed partnerships with telemedicine companies and public health agencies on a project to connect patients with cardiac devices to essential monitoring systems. The data showed that heart attack and death rates had fallen 74% over two years because of the monitoring system.

To develop a strong project from the start, ask your district international service chair to connect you with members of your district resource network. This network includes local and regional experts, like members of Rotary Action Groups and The Rotary Foundation Cadre of Technical Advisers. They have experience planning projects (from the community assessments to measurement and evaluation plans) and technical expertise in our areas of focus and Rotary grants. International service chairs can introduce you to Rotarians, Rotaractors, Rotary alumni, community members, and professionals from other organizations who are eager to support club projects. Some will be familiar with the culture and history of the region where you are working.

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Types of assessments

Combine and adapt these kinds of assessments to best suit the composition and preferences of the community:

➤ Asset inventory

➤ Community mapping

➤ Community meeting

➤ Document and policy review

➤ Focus group

➤ Interview

➤ Survey

As you determine your approach, consider any available data about the community. Has the local, regional, or national government recently published credible findings that could inform your research? Have other organizations or institutions researched the community? Do you notice any gaps in official statistical data that could be addressed through the assessment? To answer these questions, consider partnering with local experts as well as with nearby clubs and experts within Rotary who may offer different perspectives and considerations.

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Asset inventory

An asset inventory identifies the characteristics of a community, including its physical environment, institutions, services, events, and especially its people. To conduct the inventory, participants highlight individuals, places, and things to illustrate their value, use, and relevance, and then document and analyze their findings. The results can help a community explore how its assets are connected and how it can use them to create positive change. The results may also reveal prospective partners by identifying entities that care about serving the same groups or solving the same problem. These partners might help fill gaps or add value that increases the impact of your project.

Advantages of asset inventories:

- They maximize available resources.
- They encourage the creation of broad, inclusive networks to effect change.
- They help identify areas of community member interest.
- They can be maintained, expanded, and used repeatedly.
- They can account for environmental factors that are visible but undervalued.

Challenges with asset inventories:

- Data analysis is time-consuming.
- Organizing assets and identifying connections can be difficult.
- Physical assets may be overemphasized since they are easier to identify.
- Interests, skills, and other nonphysical assets can be easily overlooked.

Tips for conducting an asset inventory

- Determine what you want to inventory and identify potential participants.
- Invite a small, representative group of community members to conduct the inventory in one or more sessions.
- Use strong group facilitators who know how to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute and that each discussion group stays focused on its task and completes it on time.
- Analyze the results with the community members. Organize assets by category and document connections among them.
- Use available assets to create coalitions and networks to address community issues.
- Share the inventory results with other community members to identify potential gaps and incorporate different perspectives.
- Update and maintain the inventory regularly.

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Asset inventory

Sample inventory questions

➤ What is special about your community?

➤ What products are made in your community? What events take place in your community?

➤ When and where do people gather, and what do they do together? Include religious, social service, sporting, entertainment, informal or routine activities, and other types of gatherings.

➤ What topics or issues interest a significant number of community members?

➤ Who are the formal and informal leaders of the community? Who do people respect and regard?

➤ How is information shared in your community?

➤ What services are provided in your community? Who provides them?

➤ What natural resources are found in your community? Which areas include space with nature?

➤ What skills or knowledge in your community have been and should be shared with the next generation?

➤ What businesses, professional associations or councils, philanthropic or nongovernmental organizations, and public or private institutions exist in your community?

➤ What volunteer activities exist in your community, both formal and informal?

➤ How do community members demonstrate that they care for and trust their neighbors?

➤ What payment or financing systems are in place to pay for goods and services?

➤ Does a governing body help manage services, create and enforce rules, and perform other critical functions?

VARIATIONS

→ Divide participants into groups by gender, age, or profession to reveal how different groups perceive the community.

→ Instead of a broad-based inventory, choose a specific community issue such as education, health, or the environment that you identify through another assessment tool like a survey, focus group, or community meeting. Create an inventory of only the assets related to that issue.

→ Incorporate a walk or drive around the community to encourage an expansive approach to identifying assets.

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Asset inventory

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Community mapping

Community mapping can reveal different perspectives about a community. It requires few resources and little time and can be adapted for participants of practically any age or educational background.

In this activity, individuals or groups draw maps of their community, marking certain points of importance, noting how often they visit these places, and suggesting types of spaces they want added to the community. A facilitator leads a discussion about the maps, while another person records the discussion. In a successful community mapping exercise, participants will:

- Identify how they use community resources and any barriers to accessing them
- Compare perceptions of the importance of various community resources
- Generate ideas for community improvement
- Identify prospective partners
- Have a sense of commitment to the process

Advantages of community mapping:

- It's a lively and engaging activity.
- It encourages participants to discuss how they might improve their community.
- It can be separated into multiple sessions with different relevant groups.
- It can add historical context and reveal geographical considerations.

Challenges with community mapping:

- Analyzing the results can be difficult because the information is in a visual format.
- Deriving conclusions from the maps and determining what to do next may require additional assessment activities.
- The activity may be more focused on physical assets and infrastructure and overlook less tangible resources or challenges, such as attitudes, behaviors, or knowledge.

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Community mapping

VARIATIONS

➡ Divide participants into groups by gender, age, ethnicity, or profession to make sure that places important to underrecognized groups are represented on the maps.

➡ Have groups tour the community before drawing their maps.

➡ Ask participants to agree on a central place in the community to orient everyone's maps.

➡ Consider using the asset mapping tool together with the community mapping tool.

Tips for community mapping

- Consider consulting a community historian who can provide context about different locations.

- Keep the groups small and inclusive — ideally no more than 20 participants, divided into smaller groups of four to six people with varied representatives of the community.

- Help each small group draw a map based on its own perceptions of the community. The variety of maps will yield a substantial amount of information.

- In the large group, discuss all the maps, including:
  - What are the differences between them?
  - Why might the differences be important?
  - What are the similarities between the maps?
  - What important aspects of the community are implied by the similarities?
  - What are some suggested additions to the maps? How would these places improve the community?
  - Do the maps indicate any specific activities or projects that might improve the community? Which institutions would likely want or need to be involved, given their expertise or connections in that geographic area?

- Ask participants to volunteer for a committee to further analyze the maps and identify what to do next.

What to map

- Places of residence
- Places of importance to participants, such as markets, religious centers, schools, community centers, parks, businesses, fields, water sources, government offices, health clinics, police stations, natural areas, and recreational areas
- Places used for defecation or solid waste management, especially in relation to institutions, areas where people congregate, and water sources
- Places where participants spend the most time, using different colors to indicate daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly visits
- Places used for industry, business, and agriculture
- Places used for hunting, fishing, and harvesting or collecting food
- Places they enjoy and feel safe and welcome, as well as places they don't enjoy being and feel unsafe and unwelcome (indicated by different colors)
- Places they'd like to add to the community, indicated by type and location

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Community mapping

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Community meeting

A community meeting, sometimes called a town hall or public forum, is a public gathering that is intentionally organized to bring together residents to discuss priorities, consider potential goals, state concerns, and express preferences for possible solutions.

In these meetings, a facilitator leads discussions on issues related to the community's strengths and challenges and encourages attendees to participate. The facilitator also directs any questions to experts in the subject.

Consider appointing a respected member of the community or a representative from a trusted local organization to facilitate the meeting, particularly if cultural or language differences could be an issue. This approach also honors local decision-making methods and structures.

Before organizing a meeting, consult with residents to help define the objectives and think about different strategies that will encourage a representative group of people from the community to take part. Knowing what the community hopes to achieve at the meeting will help you plan and host a successful meeting.

Advantages of community meetings:

- They give people of diverse backgrounds a chance to express their ideas.
- They allow participants to build upon one another's responses.
- They involve a large group of people at one time.
- They identify respected community representatives to involve in a project.
- They allow participants to discern the significance of a variety of issues.
- They explore potential solutions.

Challenges with community meetings:

- It can be difficult to maintain an honest, comfortable, and relaxed environment.
- It can be difficult to keep the conversation on topic.
- They can be influenced by social constraints such as gender disparities, power dynamics, or cultural norms.
- They may be dominated by one or two active participants to the exclusion of others.

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Community meeting

Tips for hosting a community meeting

- **Identify your goals.** What insights do you hope to gain from this meeting? Are there specific issues in the community that you want to better understand? Design questions that will provoke constructive answers.

- **Select an accessible location and convenient time.** Host the discussion at a venue that is easy to find and easy to access. Consider the participants' schedules when determining a time and whether several sessions at different times and locations would allow more residents to participate.

- **Promote the event throughout the community.** Be mindful of cultural values and norms that may affect responses (for example, women may not feel empowered to talk openly and honestly in the presence of men). Factor in the level of literacy in the community and how residents normally receive information (e.g., flyers, radio, announcements at schools or houses of worship). Include details when promoting the meeting, such as whether food will be offered or childcare will be provided, as well as the start and end times.

- **Prepare a list of questions.** Keep your questions simple and concise and avoid questions designed to encourage a specific answer. If participants mention new concerns or multiple people mention the same issues, follow up with clarifying questions.

- **Set and follow a schedule.** Decide how much time to spend on each question, factoring in follow-up questions based on issues and ideas identified during the discussion.

- **Set and state ground rules.** Share rules with participants before the meeting to prevent people from monopolizing the forum, to help engage everyone in the discussion, and to keep the conversation focused.

- **Take notes.** Keep a record of the ideas in a way that everyone can examine during the discussion. Ask one or two people (not those present to engage in the conversation) to help you monitor the conversation. Record what is said, as closely as possible, rather than paraphrasing comments in your words.

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Community meeting

- **Be an active listener.** Use both verbal and nonverbal communication skills to show that you're engaged with and interested in what all participants have to say. Be considerate of their time. Try to connect different peoples' ideas and stories to demonstrate your understanding and create links between peoples' insights.

- **Request that participants elaborate.** Ask follow-up questions if you don't understand their feedback.

- **Allow for small-group discussions.** Small groups provide more speaking opportunities for attendees. Ask each group to record their notes and have a designated group member briefly summarize the discussion for the larger audience. To help make people feel comfortable participating, consider creating groups composed entirely of community members who might be less likely to speak out (e.g., a group of all women, young people, people with disabilities, people from traditionally marginalized groups, etc.).

- **Get creative.** Consider using participatory activities, visual materials, games, or other tools to support the discussion and encourage all participants to share their opinions. For example, you could ask people to mark areas of a map or images that represent the areas that are their top priority. Think about community members, such as local artists, who have unique skills that could make the experience more engaging.

Addressing challenges in community meetings

- If certain participants are dominating the conversation, make a point of asking others for their ideas.

- Monitor people's body language and react as necessary. Maybe the facilitator needs a break, or you need to stop someone from speaking too much. A five-minute break can help refocus the discussion.

- Use encouraging body language and tone of voice. For instance, lean forward when people are talking, keep your body position open and approachable, and be attentive to everyone, not just those who are most articulate. Use words to acknowledge responses but avoid making value statements such as "Good question," "That is a good point," or "I like that idea." Instead say "Thank you for sharing."

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Community meeting

- Stay mindful of group dynamics. Be aware of emotional reactions participants may have to others' comments, particularly if they appear upset, hurt, angry, or defensive. A trained facilitator should encourage participants to follow the rules and express themselves without making personal accusations or embarrassing others. If participants seem puzzled or confused, revisit the comments or points that caused the confusion or try to restate them more clearly.

- In general, keep the meeting focused on the original objectives. Sometimes, the conversation may shift to new or unexpected topics. This can uncover new perspectives, ideas, or issues that help you learn about the community's priorities and goals. When you need to refocus the discussion, summarize the points that have been made and ask if anyone has additional thoughts about the original question.

Following up after a community meeting

- Thank participants for attending and sharing their opinions and ideas.

- Summarize the main findings and outline any plans for what will happen next.

- Consider inviting some participants who were very engaged to help determine what will happen next.

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Community meeting

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Document and policy review

Reviewing documents and policies helps you understand the broader context while you gather information about a community. It requires few resources and should be used in conjunction with — and preferably before — another assessment method. Documents with government data or other publicly available information such as scholarly journal articles and news articles let you learn more about existing systems and policies, programs, budgets, and processes and uncover new information about the community.

This activity includes collecting information digitally or in person about a specific issue. Many government ministry websites have links to their policies, plans, programs, and procedures, as well as recent data about community needs.

Advantages of document reviews:

- They're a low-cost method to learn about a community.
- They offer important context about existing policies and programs.

Types of existing documents

- Data about the community and its historical needs
- Community demographics
- Government policies and current programs
- Government budgets for these programs

- The data already exists and doesn't need to be collected.

Challenges with document reviews:

- Documents often give an official perspective but don't include those of community members.
- Documents often don't show how policies are being implemented in the community.
- Publicly available data may be outdated.
- Publicly available data may not include groups that are traditionally marginalized or provide enough specificity.
- It may require a lot of time to collect and analyze many documents.
- Document reviews should only supplement, not replace, the collection of information, ideas, and feedback from community members.

- Project reports, news articles, research papers, scholarly journal articles, and publications about the community or a local issue
- Maps, satellite images, or other geographic information

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Document and policy review

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Focus group

A focus group is a carefully guided discussion that you can use to discover a community group's opinions on a particular idea. It can help you determine which issues residents believe should be addressed first and how to address them.

Conducting a focus group requires careful planning and a skilled facilitator. Most focus groups consist of six to 12 participants who represent a particular group in the community. They are asked a series of precise, open-ended questions about different issues in the community. This approach promotes dialogue because people are asked to share ideas in a group setting and can react to one another's comments in addition to answering the facilitator's questions.

In a group setting, dialogue tends to evolve and participants build on each other's responses. An effective focus group will seem more like a collaborative discussion than a debate. It's most effective to conduct a focus group in a private, comfortable setting, with one facilitator and someone to record the participants' responses.

You'll need to meet with a representative group of participants, so be sure to consider cultural beliefs, socioeconomic factors, gender and sexual orientation norms, community structures, and other social dynamics. In some places, women may not be comfortable expressing their opinions in front of male facilitators or other men. Young people may not be comfortable expressing their opinions in front of adults. You will often need to host several focus groups with different participants based on occupation, age, gender, family structure, hierarchy dynamics, or other factors.

Advantages of focus groups:

- Group dynamics can provide worthwhile information that individual data collection doesn't.
- They're useful for gaining insight into a topic that's not easily quantifiable.
- They're effective in communities with low literacy levels.
- They offer relevant information from specific groups (teachers, doctors, Indigenous communities, etc.).

Challenges with focus groups:

- Facilitators are susceptible to bias.
- A few people may dominate or derail a discussion.
- Analyzing the data may require significant time.
- You'll likely need to have several focus groups to represent the whole community.

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Focus group

Tips for conducting a focus group

- Select a location that's convenient, private, and comfortable for a small group discussion, and choose a time when participants can attend.

- If your facilitator is a community member, provide guidance beforehand about how to manage the discussion.

- Arrange for another facilitator to record the session or take notes on the group's responses, making sure participants can examine them. Periodically ask the group if the notes are accurate.

- Invite Rotary Community Corps members to participate in focus group activities.

- Invite six to 12 participants, an ideal size for a focus group. Make sure they're representative of the community and are willing to provide feedback.

- Explain the purpose of the focus group and state your goals honestly. Establish rules to promote positive interaction and confidence in the process.

- Introduce the main topic and guide the discussion using your prepared questions. Establish a schedule beforehand, such as 10-15 minutes per question.

- Encourage each person to answer each question, and allow adequate time for their responses. Listen carefully to the ideas expressed and ask for clarification if needed, but avoid confrontations or debates.

- Invite participants to respond to comments. Ensure the discussion and comments stay focused on the topic.

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Focus group

Preparing questions

Develop a list of concepts you want to discuss to help you understand people's perceptions of the community's strengths and challenges and learn what ideas they have for projects. Make sure your questions will guide the discussion and encourage people to share their ideas. Here are some common types of focus group questions:

- **Opening questions** get participants talking and feeling comfortable. They should be easy to answer.
  - o How long have you worked at the school?
  - o What do you teach or which role do you hold?
- **Introductory questions** get the group thinking about the topic and focus the conversation.
  - o What are three strengths of the school?
  - o If you could change three things at the school, what would that be and why?
- **Transition questions** prepare participants for the in-depth conversation.
  - o Why do you think 50% of girls stop attending the school after their second year?

- **Key questions focus** on major areas of concern and guide most of the discussion.
  - o What activities or training does the school have to encourage girls to keep attending school after their second year?
  - o What does the school need to do to encourage girls to return after their second year?
  - o What do families need so that they can send their daughters back to school after the second year?
- **Closing questions** conclude the discussion and allow people to express any final thoughts.
  - o Who else might be interested in sharing why they didn't send their daughters to school after the second year?
  - o Who else should we talk to about what prevents them from sending their daughters back to school?

Following up with participants

- Thank participants for their time and input.
- Consider how you'll maintain the relationship with them.
- Share your conclusions with participants and, if appropriate, invite them to help determine what will happen next.

VARIATION

→ Hold separate focus groups on the same issue, one with members of your club and others with representatives from the community. Are the responses the same or different? Were any concerns or factors mentioned that you had not previously considered?

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Focus group

Notes

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Interview

Interviews are one-on-one conversations between a facilitator (the interviewer) and a community resident or other person with a relevant relationship to the community (the respondent). Interviews allow you to gain a more thorough understanding of someone's ideas and feelings. In an interview (unlike with surveys), the facilitator can ask questions that weren't prepared in advance to follow up on a response. And unlike in group assessments, such as community discussions and focus groups, the respondent has the facilitator's complete attention and is more likely to share personal opinions.

Advantages to interviews:

- They allow the facilitator to follow the flow of conversation and ask spontaneous questions.
- They encourage the respondent to speak honestly and give spontaneous answers.

- They're the most accurate and thorough way to obtain qualitative data from people.
- They're effective in communities with low literacy levels.
- They add valuable information as a follow-up to other assessment methods.

Challenges with interviews:

- They require significant time.
- They involve only one person at a time.
- Conducting an effective interview requires practice and some skill.
- It can be difficult to find willing respondents for impromptu sessions, so schedule interviews in advance whenever possible.

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Tips for designing and conducting an effective interview

- **Identify your goals.** What insights do you hope to gain from this interview? Are there specific issues in the community that you want to better understand? Design questions that will provoke constructive answers.

- **Select an accessible location and convenient time.** Host the discussion at a venue that is easy to find and easy to access. Consider the participants' schedules when determining a time and whether several sessions at different times and locations would allow more residents to participate.

- **Invite participants who represent the community.** Whose opinions are you interested in understanding? Will you identify specific individuals to invite for interviews, or will you try to find participants by chance in a public place? Consider people from groups who may be typically overlooked. Consider how you'll address potential language barriers. Will you need interpretation support or will you offer to schedule an alternate time with an interviewer who can communicate with them more easily?

- **Prepare the interview questions.** Keep your questions as straightforward and concise as possible. Rather than asking questions that participants could answer with just "yes" or "no," ask open-ended questions that allow them to explain their responses. If you have complex questions, ask them toward the end of the interview. If you have sensitive questions, be sure to conduct your interview in a private place. Choose words that are clear and conversational.

- **Practice.** Conduct some pretend interviews with your colleagues and solicit their feedback.

- **Share the questions in advance.** Many people will feel more comfortable if they know in advance what you want to ask about and have had time to think about and prepare their responses.

- **Establish a rapport.** Make sure the respondent is comfortable before you ask any questions.

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Interview

- **Set and follow a schedule.** Decide how much time to spend on each question, factoring in follow-up questions based on issues and ideas identified during the discussion.

- **Conduct your interview like a conversation.** Memorize your questions if possible so you can ask them naturally, changing the order and adding impromptu follow-ups as needed.

- **Take accurate notes.** If you're recording audio of your conversation, get the respondent's consent. Once you start recording, state the expectations of the interview process.

- **Be an active listener.** Show the other person that you're engaged and interested. Be considerate of the person's time. After all, this may be the first conversation in a long and productive service collaboration.

- **Ask people to elaborate on short responses.** Answers of just "yes" or "no" won't yield much useful information. Structure your follow-up questions in ways that require more detailed explanations.

Ask people to clarify or provide more information if you don't understand their responses. You may want to prepare specific prompts to request additional detail. For example:

Question: How easy is it to get health care in your community?

Prompts:

o For what reasons would you go to the hospital or clinic?

o What do people do if they need medical care but don't have insurance or funds to pay for it?

o How do people get to the health care facility?

- **Offer to follow up with the people you interview.** Ask them if they'd like to be involved in future assessments or community improvement activities. Be sure to follow through on these commitments.

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Interview

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Survey

Surveys are a popular method of collecting information and opinions. In the context of a community assessment, a survey can reveal the community's perceived strengths, assets, weaknesses, and needs. Surveys can be general or focus on specific groups. Try to survey as many people as you can, focusing on the most relevant groups in the community — including marginalized groups. You can conduct surveys through email, by phone, or in person.

Advantages to surveys:

- They can be administered remotely.
- They can be repeated.
- They can be completed anonymously, which encourages candid responses.
- They're generally inexpensive to administer.
- They can be more inclusive of underrepresented community members who may not be able to provide feedback in person.

Challenges with surveys:

- Identifying prospective respondents and obtaining their personal contact information can be difficult.
- Emailed surveys are ineffective in places where internet access is limited.
- Phone surveys may be subject to sample or interviewer bias.
- Response rates for remote surveys are generally low compared to in-person assessments.
- In-person surveys may require a more significant investment of time or finances.
- Written surveys are ineffective in communities with low literacy levels.
- Written surveys don't allow for follow-up questions.

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Survey

Tips for designing an effective survey:

- **Compile and customize the questions.** Consider using existing tools from reputable organizations. Many are available online. For example, when you work on a WASH in Schools project, select questions from the Rotary tools for assessing needs and collecting data and modify them to fit the context.

- **Explain why you're asking the questions.** Participants are more likely to respond if they believe it will lead to a valuable outcome, such as change they want in their community. Emphasize that the questions are to determine the community's preferences and priorities, and that there are no right or wrong answers.

- **Keep it short and straightforward.** If your survey is too long, people may rush their responses or even abandon the survey before completing it. Make sure your questions are brief and specific.

- **Minimize bias in your questions.** Avoid leading questions such as "Would you like to see a new library in the vacant lot instead of a playground?" in favor of more neutral wording: "What would you like to see developed in the vacant lot? a) Library b) Playground c) Other (please describe)."

- **Conduct a small test of the survey.** This can reveal whether your questions are clear and specific.

- **Make adjustments as needed to improve it.** If you find that the questions aren't clear or the format isn't working, adjust the survey before asking more people to take part.

- **Make sure everyone can participate.** Offer the option to have unbiased volunteers help people complete the survey if they would have difficulty doing so on their own because of a disability, low literacy level, or other reason.

- **Explain what you'll do with the results.** Tell participants what you plan to do with the data and who will have access to it.

- **Ensure you have an appropriately representative sample.** The people you invite or select to complete the survey should be representative of the community's population.

- **Honor confidentiality.** If you have offered anonymity, ensure that the data you collect cannot be traced to the responder, and store and discard data as appropriate.

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Survey

Types of survey questions

- **Multiple-choice questions**. Respondents select one or more options from a list. Multiple-choice questions work best when you can offer a fixed number of options.

  Example: What do you believe are the most pressing needs in your community (Select two.):

  ☐ Health care

  ☐ Quality of education

  ☐ Employment opportunities

  ☐ Public safety

  ☐ Other (please describe): _____

- **Open-ended questions.** Respondents answer questions in their own words. This format can elicit more nuanced responses, but the survey results won't be as easily quantifiable and will need to be individually analyzed.

  Example: If you could improve one aspect of your community, what would it be and why?

- **Demographic questions.** Information about the respondent (such as their gender, education level, income) can add context to responses and can reveal trends within a larger population.

  Example: What is your age?

  ☐ 18-24

  ☐ 25-34

  ☐ 35-44

  ☐ 45-54

  ☐ 55-64

  ☐ 65+

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Survey

- **Rating scales.** Respondents rate their opinion of a statement or set of statements using a range of feelings or attitudes. To avoid confusion, try to present all statements positively rather than negatively. For instance, use "The number of teachers is sufficient" rather than "The number of teachers is not sufficient."

Example: Please respond to each statement about your school:

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Somewhat disagree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	4 Somewhat agree	5 Strongly agree
The number of teachers is sufficient.					
Our teachers are well qualified.					
Our teachers continue learning and improving their skills.					
Our school provides a safe environment for children.					
Our classrooms are well equipped.					
I am familiar with my child's curriculum.					
I regularly help my child with homework.					
Our school provides nutritious meals.					

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Survey

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Who to consult with throughout the assessment

Engaging with people and groups who live and work in the community and can offer unique perspectives and ideas is critical to a thorough assessment. Consider these suggestions about who to consult with as part of this process.

The list is divided by areas of focus, but it's also important to consider who might be affected outside the planned area of focus. In a medical outreach program (disease prevention and treatment), for example, could you also include the responsible disposal of the medical waste produced (environment)? Could your teacher training initiative (basic education and literacy) positively contribute to peacebuilding and conflict prevention?

Explore the connections between the areas of focus to maximize the peacebuilding potential of your project. Use the Positive Peace Project Design Tool to help you identify how different kinds of projects can have an impact on peace.

Peacebuilding and conflict prevention

These projects need to use "do no harm" and conflict-sensitive approaches to carrying out assessments and designing the project. Always consider if your intervention could have unintended effects that would reinforce divisions in society. When you assess communities in conflict, people who have experienced trauma, or other sensitive populations, it's crucial to work directly with people and organizations that understand the dynamics of the situation and have specialized training to understand how to implement a project in the community. This will help ensure that assessments are conducted appropriately, with the best possible outcome. Consult with:

- Groups that are engaged in conflict or at risk of it
- Civil society organizations
- Schools and educational institutions
- Peace committees or peace organizations in the community
- Local business and economic development organizations
- Local government and law enforcement authorities
- Marginalized or underrepresented groups within the community
- People who have experienced violence, refugees, or internally displaced people
- Depending on the project: young people at economic risk, communities that have been persecuted or marginalized, or other groups affected by conflict or violence
- Rotary Peace Fellows or Positive Peace Activators who live or work in the area

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Who to consult with throughout the assessment

Disease prevention and treatment/Maternal and child health

- Individual health care recipients, prioritizing those at high risk for the condition or disease being addressed
- Community health centers and hospitals
- Mobile outreach systems
- Community health care workers
- Skilled birth attendants
- Health care professionals (nurses, doctors, midwives, technicians, specialists, etc.)
- Officials from the ministry of health

- Access and continuum of care structures:
  o Prevention, primary care, and referral systems
  o Transportation providers
  o Hospitals
  o Follow-up and rehabilitation services
  o Chronic care support and palliative or hospice care systems

Not sure where to start?

One way to promote community involvement is to work with Rotary Community Corps. These are teams of nonmembers who work with Rotary clubs to improve their communities. If your club sponsors an RCC in the community, work directly with the group. If not, encourage local volunteers to form one. Sponsoring a Rotary Community Corps is a great way for a club to collaborate with community members as true partners in service.

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Who to consult with throughout the assessment

Water, sanitation, and hygiene

- Community leaders, particularly women
- Officials from the ministries of water, sanitation, or environment
- Officials from the ministry of education, along with students, teachers, administrators, and parents (for WASH in Schools projects)
- Officials from the ministry of health (for projects in health care facilities)
- District or local government representatives
- Private and public utility companies

- Service providers (hand pump mechanics, community outreach workers, etc.)
- Farmers (irrigation)
- Water committees
- Water, sanitation, and hygiene advocacy associations

Disaster response

Working with people, institutions, community partners, and collaborators is essential to address emergency preparedness, disaster response, and recovery needs. Either before or after a disaster, these people and groups can help you identify where support is needed in a community:

→ People directly affected by the crisis

→ First responders, including emergency management institutions

→ Organizations and institutions that specialize in disaster preparedness, search and rescue operations, and response and recovery efforts

→ Government agencies and departments, including ministries of health, water and sanitation, the environment, education, emergency services, and law enforcement

→ Institutions that oversee larger communal spaces, such as community centers, stadiums, or arenas

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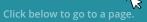# Who to consult with throughout the assessment

Basic education and literacy

- Teachers
- Parents
- Students
- Youth who do not attend school
- School administrators
- School management committees
- Officials from the ministry of education
- Adult education institutes

- Vocational training institutes
- Community and technical colleges
- Libraries and librarians
- Local cultural leaders

Youth service

Your assessments may reveal opportunities to provide programs for young leaders like starting an Interact club to instill a passion for service or hosting a Rotary Youth Leadership Award (RYLA) event to help develop leadership skills and confidence in young people. Collaborate with the following groups and individuals to find out if a young leader program can add value:

➔ Young people directly

➔ Parents

➔ Educators and school administrators

➔ Youth community centers and groups

➔ Government ministries of education and youth development

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Community economic development

- Local government authorities
- Women's groups
- Government extension services
- Job research centers
- Entrepreneurs
- Officials from the ministries of trade, agriculture, social services, women's empowerment, and vocational services
- Farmers
- Unemployed youth and adults
- Business owners
- Banks

- Cooperatives (agricultural, savings and loan, etc.)
- Microfinance institutions
- Vocational training institutions
- Community colleges
- Technical and trade schools
- Universities
- Adult education organizations

Help young people get involved through service-learning

Service-learning is a proven method for encouraging young people to address the underlying causes of issues in their areas and create a lasting impact in their communities and in themselves. Find interactive courses about service-learning in the Learning Center, along with workbooks for youth participants and adult advisers.

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Environment

Assessing a community also means considering the local biological communities and their unique natural features. Think about how your project may affect local ecosystems, air and water, and who you might consult for perspective about the impact on local plants and animals. Seek opportunities to collaborate, avoid duplicating efforts, and learn from previous projects by talking to people and organizations in the area, such as:

- Community associations
- Local conservation groups
- Environmental leaders, especially women
- Representatives of Indigenous peoples, traditional peoples, or communal landowners in the region
- Officials from the ministries or departments of the environment, sustainable development, natural resources, forests or fisheries, or climate change (or the regional equivalents)
- Public and private utilities for water and energy

- Tourism sector representatives
- Parks and recreation departments
- Agricultural cooperatives, diverse types of farmers, and fishers
- Local mayoral offices
- Scientific institutions (for background data)
- Real estate experts and legal advisers
- University science and environmental departments, as well as relevant research centers
- Science teachers, school administrators, and students
- Representatives of environmental nongovernmental organizations in the country
- Park rangers, forest rangers, and conservation officers
- Water committees

Grants

The results of a community assessment can also help you determine whether you should apply for a grant from The Rotary Foundation to help address the community's priorities. Your project should be designed in response to what you discovered during your assessment. If you decide to apply for a global grant from The Rotary Foundation, the community assessment results need to be submitted within your application. See the Global Grants Community Assessment Results form for the specific questions you need to answer. Find more information about the global grant application process and tips for strengthening your project in A Guide to Global Grants.

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Preparing the community assessment report

After you've finished collecting information, it's time to analyze the qualitative and quantitative data and prepare a comprehensive overview of the community's strengths, priorities, challenges, and opportunities so you can decide how to best work with the community toward its goals.

Your report should include:

- The purpose of the assessment and relevant background
- Community details such as demographics, social dynamics, economic conditions, health indicators, and environmental factors
- A description of your methods
- An analysis of the strengths and limitations of your approach, including an acknowledgment of biases
- Data and key findings, including the community's history, culture, strengths, assets, weaknesses, and needs
- Issues or projects to consider prioritizing

Share your findings with the community and the people and organizations that participated in the assessment phase. Give them an opportunity to offer feedback. Remember that the report does not select a solution for any issue. Instead, it provides an overview of the data and the findings and identifies the community's priorities.

Continue working with community members, organizations, and institutions to prioritize which challenges to address first and work collaboratively to design solutions that meet their needs. Learn more about developing effective projects.

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