

Chapter 6

Conducting a Rapid EE&C Assessment

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To design an environmental education or communication program, it is important to begin with a sense of the history of the environmental issue, knowledge of the key institutions and individuals, and an idea of which options are possible. While local program organizers may know this information very well, asking someone with a fresh perspective to provide an outsider's view of the situation. External donor institutions rely on this type of assessment before a project is conceived.

This chapter provides suggestions for situations in which an individual or team obtains a rapid assessment of a situation—a quick, clear snapshot of the existing state of environmental education and communication (EE&C) in a particular country, region, community, or a specific development project or institution. Resources—notably financial, personnel, and time—are usually limited (the typical rapid assessment is completed in 5–10 days).

Creating an accurate portrait can be challenging. But any information and recommendations stemming from a rapid assessment can prove invaluable in helping program managers identify both the obstacles to, and potential for, upgrading EE&C technical capacity. And, when projects are still on the drawing board, an assessment can be equally useful in integrating the fundamentals of effective EE&C processes with all project components.

In GreenCOM's experience, rapid assessments are conducted by USAID staff or consultants in the early stages of a project. In some cases, more lengthy assessments are part of an overall strategy to provide regional assistance and long-term planning, as in the case at the end of this chapter will elucidate.

Simply stated, successful EE&C projects seldom result from the preconceived notions of government

planners, international donors, NGO representatives, or other influentials. Rather, successful and sustainable EE&C initiatives are usually built on a combination of inputs from these groups, as well as from project recipients, beneficiaries, and stakeholders.

However, words alone are not sufficient for assessing an environmental situation. People do not always do what they say they do. The assessors should carefully observe whether actions match words.

THE PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL

Whatever the subject, determining a scheme for rapidly collecting meaningful information from various sources—existing documents, in-depth interviews, focus groups, or direct observation—is fundamental to any assessment. Time and resources must be used efficiently to benefit all parties. Any individual or team conducting an EE&C assessment in an unfamiliar country for an unknown program or organization must be prepared to answer three questions:

1. What are the environmental priorities of an agency institution, group, or project?
2. Who is/will be the likely target audience or beneficiary group of any EE&C capacity-building efforts, interventions, or messages?
3. How are both of the above (environmental priorities and target audiences) being addressed now, how were they addressed in the past, and how will they be addressed for the future?

Answers to these questions will enable assessors to determine and recommend:

- ◆ Appropriate EE&C implementation channels (e.g., formal, nonformal, or informal EE&C systems);
- ◆ The most suitable type of EE&C capacity-building activity (e.g., technical assistance, workshops or seminars, demonstrations, guided practice, experiential learning, among others); and
- ◆ The type and level of involvement of EE&C and other technical specialist(s) required to achieve institutional or project goals and objectives, as well as fit the actual situation, context (available budget, time frame, other resources, etc.) and, target audience (its environmental priorities, training needs, etc.).

GETTING STARTED: WHO TO TALK TO?

Identifying the root causes of an environmental problem will help you design a realistic and appropriate EE&C solution or response. At the outset, gaining an understanding of the situational context of all of the various stakeholders is imperative. Get respondents to discuss what they perceive as the real environmental priorities or issue. Set well-defined assumptions, ask probing questions, and develop mutually agreed-upon objectives and expectations of the assessment.

Limiting information-gathering efforts to only a single level, type, or class of stakeholder is probably one of the most common mistakes in conducting an assessment. Too frequently—usually because of time constraints—assessments focus on senior officials, high-level organizational representatives, or other prominent leaders, and influential citizens. This can result in a skewed view of a particular situation centering on an institution’s outlook and perspective. To ensure a more complete picture, seek out representative comments and viewpoints at all levels of a given organization, as well as among stakeholders, beneficiaries, and groups that will be affected. It is equally important to elicit viewpoints and comments from both men and women, as gender differences can be significant (see Chapter 4). Interview roughly equal num-

bers of men and women across segments of the private, public, and NGO sectors, such as:

- ◆ Government policy and decision makers (at the national, regional, or community-level);
- ◆ Institutional/project managers, supervisors, and administrators;
- ◆ Influential leaders or opinion makers from the private sector, NGO community, and religious organizations;
- ◆ Technicians, instructors, teachers, extensionists;
- ◆ Farmers and low-skilled workers;
- ◆ Representatives of the national, regional, or local mass media (print, radio, and TV as appropriate);
- ◆ Community members, students, or well-defined groups;
- ◆ Institutional/project beneficiaries, recipients, or constituents.

Given time and budget constraints, interviewing all groups is probably not possible. To ensure a representative sample, select a number of people from each major category. Rather than relying on more people in fewer categories, cast a broad net and seek representative viewpoints from selected individuals across institutions and society to get a more balanced picture of the issue.

UNCOVERING THE FACTS

Getting people to open up and talk freely is often a challenge. Try to create a comfortable rapport with interviewees before the questioning. Naturally, this will be easier if you know local customs, language, greetings, and manners of social interaction. To facilitate entry into a new setting, have a local counterpart accompany the assessment team and handle all introductions, translate when necessary, and explain the team’s reason for seeking their opinions and views.

In all instances, the old adage “honesty is the best policy,” is an appropriate rule of thumb. There is no reason to trick an individual into talking. Questions or inquiries should be direct and candid, not imposing or intrusive. Interviewees should be told the exact purpose and objective of the line of

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questioning and how the information will be used. Similarly, open-ended questions (where the respondent can freely answer) are more suited to assessment purposes than closed-ended questions (where answers are in categories, such as “yes” or “no”). Answers should never be put in an interviewee’s mouth.

Before engaging an individual in conversation, the assessment team should be thoroughly familiar with the interview questions. This same set of questions should be asked of representatives from each of the key groups listed earlier, with vocabulary changes as necessary to ensure comprehension. All individuals interviewed should be thanked for their time and valuable insights.

VERIFICATION

When asked to explain their EE&C activity, most people run to get a set of products to demonstrate their accomplishments. Although these are reasonable indicators of a project’s ability to communicate with a specific audience, they should be recognized as mere byproducts of planning efforts, and not confused with project outcomes. Therefore, to capture accurately the state of EE&C competence in an organization, ask organization representatives to do one or more of the following:

- ◆ Demonstrate the overall EE&C process that the institution or group uses.
- ◆ Demonstrate how programmers develop, test, use, and evaluate their EE&C materials. Ask how they use a particular EE&C product or material in a real-life training event, classroom setting, or in whatever channel or manner they are being used, promoted, distributed, etc.
- ◆ Sample the EE&C products and materials. Theses could include, but are not limited to: posters, brochures, curricula, training manuals, newspaper editorials or advertisements, or other print/graphic materials; radio spots/programs, videos television spots and programs or other mass media products and materials; games, puzzles, etc.; interpretative

materials, and signage; administrative and technical reports, documents, memoranda, etc.

These steps are important because people do not always do what they say they do; nor does their explanation of a product, event, or process always match their actual execution. Consequently, it is imperative to observe or verify what organizations claim they are doing. This is especially useful as a quick and simple way to determine whether the EE&C materials, products or processes are serving their intended purpose of raising awareness or changing attitudes or behaviors of a target group. Simply reviewing actual EE&C products and processes in use will enable an assessor to identify both strengths and weaknesses. In addition, it will provide insights into what types of EE&C capacity-building initiatives may be needed for the institution. Answers to questions in three broad areas (below) can help assess the training needs:

Diagnostic and Strategic Planning

Has a process been worked out to regularize the execution, production, or distribution of a particular EE&C activity, product, material, or message? Are the EE&C goals and objectives clearly defined? Are the EE&C products and materials part of a well-conceived strategic plan or a piecemeal, isolated, one-time product developed to meet a particular situation? Do the EE&C materials fit within the institution’s vision or plan of action? Are gender considerations integrated into the overall process and various project components?

Materials Development

Are EE&C products or materials the outcome of an evaluation process that includes formative research, pretesting, and revising the materials? Do they reflect the interests and informational, educational, or communication needs of the target audience? Or are they the work of well-intentioned individuals who believe they know what their target audience needs and wants?

Do recipients like or dislike the materials? Are they used?

Are the products suited to the learning characteristics of the intended audience? Are there different messages for men and women, boys and girls, urban and rural locations, or does “one size fit all?” Are there gender or other societal stereotypes? Do the messages contain the basic elements of well-designed educational or communication materials?

Has the institution employed an appropriate educational or communication medium to meet its intended objectives with the desired outcomes? Are the products available in sufficient quantities to cover a target audience? Is product quality adequate for the intended purpose and audience? Do products conflict with, or complement EE&C efforts of other institutions addressing similar development issues?

Do recipients like or dislike the materials? Are they used? Do recipients understand the intended EE&C message? Do the intended messages accurately reflect the environmental priorities and concerns of the implementing institution as well as the audience? Do the products contain clearly understandable actions that people can easily accomplish at no or low cost?

Monitoring and Evaluation

Is there a feedback mechanism to continuously revise, modify, or improve EE&C material? Are the materials monitored for effectiveness and impact?

With these questions in mind, an assessment team can enter into an unfamiliar situation and generate a fairly accurate picture of the institutional needs.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Field notes are not sufficient. Data gathered must be synthesized and distilled to reveal the essence of the assessment findings and observations. This refining stage is the natural precursor to developing a concise set of recommendations.

In developing these findings, another pair of questions could be helpful:

1. Who is the intended recipient of this information?
2. What is the most appropriate and useful format for presenting your findings and recommendations to this audience?

A written report is usually the most useful form of presentation. However, before pen is put to paper, an oral discussion with key stakeholders, or a short presentation of preliminary findings, may be helpful. This practice session will allow the assessment team to receive initial comments about accuracy of the findings and identify any controversial or sensitive issues. It also serves the invaluable purpose of getting the actors together to focus on EE&C issues, problems, and opportunities for what may be the first time.

With the debriefing over, a formal written report of the findings, observations and recommendations can be submitted.

A brief assessment report should not exceed 10–15 pages. Also, a reader-friendly format, free of technical or academic jargon, is best suited for this type of report. If this is not possible, a glossary of terms is useful.

Funding issues and negotiations with counterpart institutions are usually overriding influences on the actual outcome of an assessment. Therefore, consider presenting all recommendations as a series of options for developing EE&C capacity, rather than a set of prescriptions or directives of what “must be done.” This approach will permit donors and host country institutions to shape an appropriate EE&C response reflecting budget realities, time constraints, and environmental priorities. It also will allow them to consider a range of alternatives that can fit their respective strategic objectives and results frameworks.

EE&C ASSESSMENTS IN AFRICA

In 1994, GreenCOM conducted assessments of environmental education and communication (EE&C) activities in five African nations at the request of USAID’s Africa Bureau and the Bureau for Global Programs. The goal was to conduct an inventory of programs, people, skills, and possibil-

ities in each nation and synthesize these experiences into one document to provide program direction for these and similar nations. The USAID missions in The Gambia, Guinea, Madagascar, Namibia, and Uganda hosted the consultants who conducted the assessments, providing them with contacts, background, and field support.

The assessments involved four primary areas of inquiry:

- ◆ The extent and quality of EE&C work underway.
- ◆ The range, quality, and capacity of individuals and organizations involved in EE&C, including government agencies, indigenous and intermediary NGOs, and donor organizations.
- ◆ The capacity of communications agencies to provide services (such as printing, videotaping, evaluation research).
- ◆ The degree to which gender is incorporated in the design, implementation, and evaluation of current EE&C programs.

These assessments were not “rapid” in one sense—they lasted four weeks. Rather than focus on one environmental issue or potential development effort, the inventories were broad sweeps of existing programs, with suggestions and recommendations from both interviewees and consultants.

THE NAMIBIA EXAMPLE

Each consultant approached the task with different resources and background, but the basic approach to conducting an assessment was consistent. In Namibia, for example, the existing Namibian Environmental Network was eager to use the results of the assessment as its own inventory of EE&C programs and possibilities (Monroe, 1994). Individuals were interested in being represented in the document with their own visions of the challenges and future, as well as suggesting other people and programs that should be documented. When no new names were provided through this “scatter gun” technique, the assessment was deemed fairly complete. Below are some of the agencies contacted by phone or visited.

Government Agencies

Ministry of Education and Culture
Ongwediva College of Education
University of Namibia
Adult and Continuing Education
Technicon
Ministry of Environment and Tourism
Ministry of Youth and Sport
Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources
Ministry of Agriculture, Water, and Rural
Development
Ongwediva Rural Development Center

Environmental Education Programs and Centers

Okatjikona E.E. Center
Namutoni E.E. Center
Wereldsend Environmental
Conservo
Namibian Animal Rehabilitation
Research, and Education Center
Cleanup Campaigns
Etosha Ecological Institute

NGOs

Rossing Foundation
Namibian Nature Foundation
Wildlife Society
Namibian Development Trust
World Wildlife Fund
Onankali Nursery
GECCO
Cheetah Conservation Fund
Nyae Nyae Development Fund

Donor Agencies and Projects

USAID—LIFE and READ
US Peace Corps
SIDA—Enviroteach
Denmark—Life Science Project
GTZ—SARDEP
British Council

Other

Farmers Union

BRICKS Community Project
Social Impact Assessment and Policy Analysis
Corporation
Radio and TV stations

In Namibia, interviews with environmental education program people used the following interview guidelines:

- ◆ Please describe your EE&C program, showing components as feasible.
- ◆ Who attends, by gender, by ethnicity, by geography?
- ◆ What objectives are met?
- ◆ How does this program fit into other learning events?
- ◆ Who does not attend, and why?
- ◆ What do you see as barriers to more effective EE&C programs in your region?
- ◆ What suggestions do you have for overcoming these barriers?
- ◆ If you could change anything, what would you change?
- ◆ How does this program interact with those in other regions, other Ministries, etc.?

The responses were written into a summary of each program under the following headings:

- ◆ Background
- ◆ EE&C Activities
- ◆ Funding and Capacity
- ◆ Wisdom Shared

The assessments from all five countries were compiled into a general description of EE&C in these nations, along with recommendations for how EE&C programs could be developed, enhanced, and supported (GreenCOM, 1996).

Because of the breadth and depth of interviews, many recommendations flowed from these rapid assessments regarding policy work, planning, implementation, materials development and dissemination, school-community linkages, and out-of-school youth. In addition, the researchers were able to recommend strategies for agricultural extension agents, site-based interpretation, and media and arts campaigns. (See GreenCOM, 1996 for the full list of recommendations.)

References

- GreenCOM. (1996.) *People and Their Environment: Environmental Education and Communication in Five African Countries*. Washington, DC: USAID/AED.
- Monroe, M.C. (1994.) *Environmental Education and Communication in Namibia*. Washington DC: USAID/AED.