Overview

- The two main uses of needs assessment

- A 3-step approach to theory-based needs assessment:
  - Identify the main presenting need
  - Identify the underlying causes of that need, build a needs-based program theory
  - Document the nature and extent of needs and their causes (baseline data, or outcomes)

- Using a needs-based logic model as a framework for evaluation
The two main uses of NA

- Needs assessment (NA) can be used for two main purposes:
  - Program / intervention / product design (designing something that will address the true needs of the target population)
  - Evaluation of an existing program / product / intervention (identifying baseline & outcome criteria – the needs that are / should be met)

A 3-step approach to T-B NA

1. Identify the primary presenting need(s) in an existing population

2. Identify the main causes underlying those needs
   - This process draws on existing theory, research and local knowledge
   - The end product is a needs-based program theory that can be used for evaluation

3. Determine the nature and extent of the presenting needs & their causes (i.e., baseline/outcome data)
Step 1: Identify presenting needs

- Start with the primary unmet need – the reason why the program/intervention/product was considered necessary in the first place.

- This may be, for example:
  - A problem (e.g., problematic behavior)
  - A change in circumstances (e.g., a new job) that requires different skills or knowledge
  - Unrealized potential

Important distinction: Needs vs. wants

- The primary purpose of any intervention is (or should be!) to address the needs of a specific group of individuals and/or organizations.

- Needs vs. wants
  - Need = “something without which unsatisfactory functioning occurs”
  - Want = “something consciously desired, and without which dissatisfaction occurs”

- Therefore, most outcomes should relate to needs (i.e., improved functioning in that context).
Step 2: Identify underlying causes

- The right intervention to address the need depends on what caused it!
  - Part of the evaluator’s job is to question whether an intervention was the right one in the first place

- Key goal:
  - Avoid making logical leaps from problem to solution

- Important distinction:
  - Performance needs vs. instrumental needs

Performance vs. instrumental needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTRUMENTAL NEED (intervention)</th>
<th>UNDERLYING CAUSE (short-term outcome)</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE NEED (presenting problem, long-term outcome)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Individual Performance</td>
</tr>
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...
Performance vs. instrumental needs

- **Performance needs**
  - “We need this level of functioning/performance”
  - Performance needs are outcomes

- **Instrumental needs**
  - “We need Intervention X in order to achieve that”
  - Instrumental needs are parts of the intervention

- You can use this distinction to:
  - Prevent or identify logical leaps
  - Question underlying assumptions
  - Check that all the important causes are being addressed (not just the most obvious one)
Using program theory to map needs

- Start with the “presenting need” (problem, need for new skills/knowledge/etc, or unrealized potential)

- Identify possible causes (e.g., from the literature); investigate to find which are important in this case (causal tracing methods)

- Also investigate any relevant strengths that may affect the success of the program

- Map all information onto a logic model

- Use the logic model as a ‘road map’ to plan documentation of needs and outcomes

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Ex: Community nutrition program

- **Vision/needs**
  - Well nourished/healthy Native Hawaiian families & communities

- **Causes of unmet need**
  - Healthy ingredients unavailable or expensive
  - Perception that healthy = not tasty
  - Lack of knowledge about nutrition

- **Important strengths**
  - Extensive ‘ohana (extended family) networks
  - Respect for kūpuna (elders) and for tradition
  - Tradition of meeting and exchanging ideas in the context of a meal
Step 3: Nature & extent of needs

- This step in the needs assessment is used to
  - Unpack each need and understand its contents
  - Generate baseline data (early on) or outcome data (while a program is in progress or after completion)

- The needs assessment should cover:
  - Conscious and unconscious needs
  - Met needs (examples of where people are doing well) and unmet needs (examples of where people are struggling or not reaching their full potential)

- Needs assessment is more difficult than simply asking people what they need!
Unpacking each need in the logic model

- The goal here is to identify what good performance/knowledge/skill looks like, and what the main gaps are when it is poor
- E.g., for knowledge of nutrition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Met needs</th>
<th>Conscious needs</th>
<th>Unconscious needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask families who are known to eat healthily what they (both adults and children) know about nutrition and how they plan their diets</td>
<td>Have a dietician evaluate the nutritional content in the diet of healthy eating families in the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unmet needs</th>
<th>Have a dietician identify the major food groups and types of nutrients present in the diet of healthy eating families in the community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask families who do not yet eat much healthy food what they know (specifically) about the food value in their current diet vs. other foods</td>
<td>Have a dietician evaluate the nutritional content in the diet of a non-healthy eating family; identify where the poor food choices are occurring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Generate baseline or outcome data

- Open-ended exploration of met/unmet, conscious/unconscious needs unpacks the “construct” underlying each need/outcome
- The next step is to evaluate current levels of functioning on each need/outcome, which gives us:
  - Baseline data (if the program is brand new, not yet implemented, or not yet designed)
  - Outcome data (if the program is up and running and the timeframe is right)
- Evaluating (not just describing) current levels of functioning = saying something explicit about how well the target populations are functioning on each dimension (not just presenting the numbers and/or descriptions) – that’s an evaluative baseline
Logic models as evaluation ‘road maps’

- The ‘Outcomes’ columns can be unpacked for outcome evaluation:
  - How substantial or valuable was the progress made on meeting each need?
  - [We can think of the causes as ‘upstream needs’ or ‘intermediate outcomes’]

- The ‘Intervention’ column can be used to build a list of criteria for process evaluation, e.g., for the gardening lessons:
  - Extent to which they cover all necessary skills
  - Level-appropriateness for children
  - Consistent with good and safe gardening
  - Enjoyable and interesting

Logic models for evaluation planning

- The logic model can also be used to plan what to look at at different points in program maturity
  - Process evaluation can be very useful early on to smooth out implementation glitches; later evaluations should also look at process
  - The first column of outcomes (often knowledge, skill, or attitude change) can typically be assessed quite soon after completion of the program
  - The second column of outcomes might be detectable a few weeks or months later
  - Long-term outcomes (the right-hand column) might be expected to emerge several months to years later
Reflections

- Program theory is:
  - Primarily used for the evaluation of existing programs
  - Often based on stakeholder theory, and sometimes also on the literature

- But there is huge potential in:
  - Improving the robustness of program theory by basing it on sound needs assessment
  - Using program theory as a tool to trace causes and identify upstream needs (i.e., intermediate outcomes)
  - Using a reality-grounded program theory as a tool for causal inference – are the changes really “outcomes”?

Some useful references
