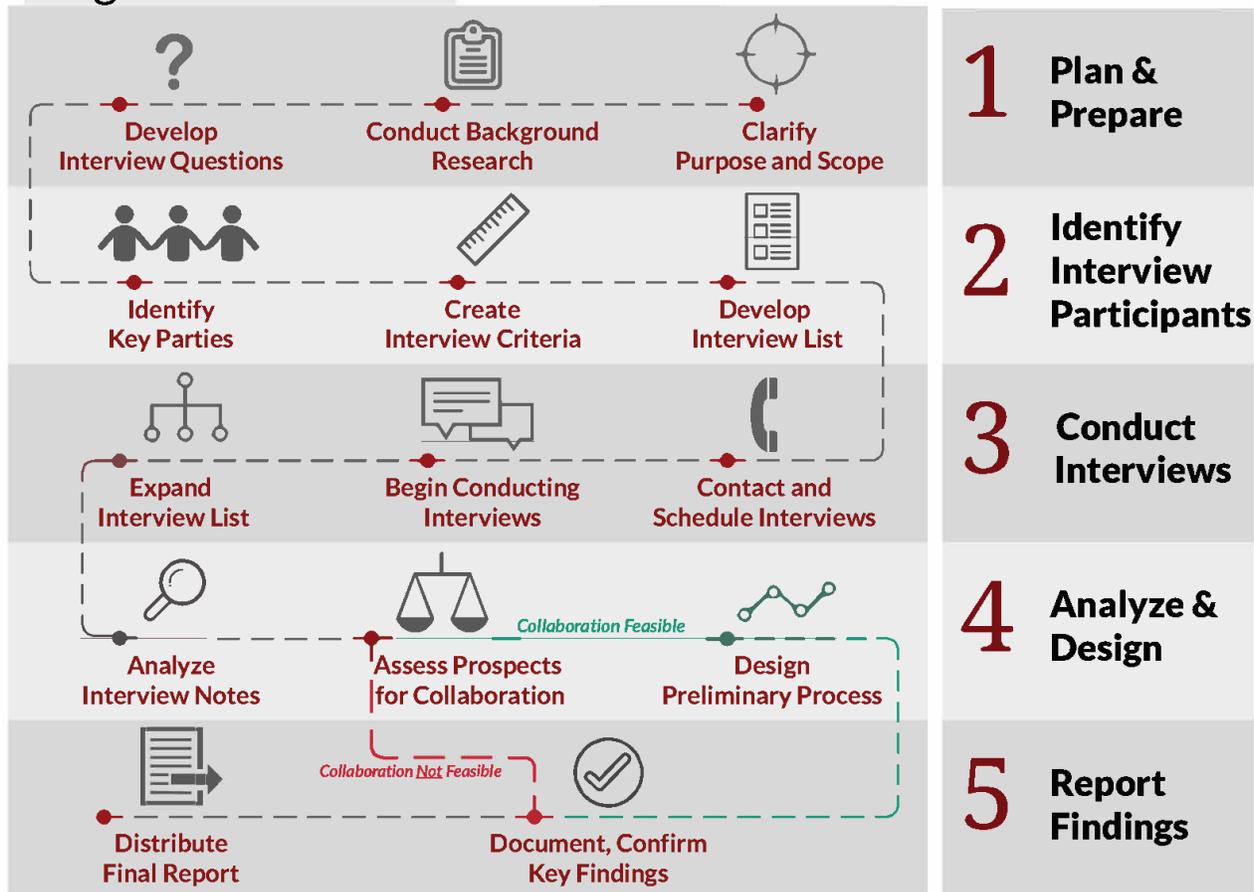


Stages of a Situation Assessment



A FRAMEWORK FOR CONDUCTING SITUATION ASSESSMENTS

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Extension professionals are increasingly asked to convene communities facing conflict, including complex social, economic, environmental and technological situations. (Cooley 1994). A collaborative process with facilitated problem solving can be an effective way to address such circumstances. Given their complex nature and the range of involved parties, convening and facilitating collaborative processes requires specific skills and methods. One important such method is a situation assessment, which involves interviewing a range of involved parties to understand interests, likely challenges, and opportunities. A situation assessment is a reliable first step to determine the feasibility and design of a collaborative process.

This document is intended to provide guidance on conducting situation assessments for university Extension professionals. It offers a framework for conducting a situation assessment that allows for adaptation and tailoring to meet unique needs of Extension programs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Extension professionals are increasingly asked to convene communities facing conflict, including complex social, economic, environmental and technological situations. (Cooley 1994). Such issues are often grounded in value perspectives where scientific or “evidence-based” logic is an ineffective mode for problem resolution (Head and Alford 2013). To effectively address complex situations, cooperative and collaborative approaches are necessary (Head and Alford 2013; Bingham et al. 2005). Experience has shown that the success of collaborative processes often depends on early design decisions (Susskind 1999), and poorly designed processes can have negative social and environmental impacts (Koontz 2004).

Since collaborative processes vary from case to case, a standard design does not exist. Each process must be tailored to meet the unique qualities of each situation. Before launching a collaborative process, the situation should first be assessed to determine the prospects of collaboration succeeding (Susskind 1999). Conducting a situation assessment that involves confidential interviews with a range of

involved parties to understand interests, likely challenges, and opportunities associated with the situation serves as a reliable first step to determine the feasibility and design of a collaborative process (Susskind 1999; Schenk 2007). Extension professionals are well-positioned to play the role of assessor and convener of collaborative processes. Using a structured methodology to assess a given situation not only allows for the development of more thoughtful, effective, custom-designed processes, it also allows Extension professionals to build relationships and gain trust among the involved parties.

II. THE RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING SITUATION ASSESSMENTS

Situation assessments are a time-proven method used in the field of multi-party dispute resolution field. This technique derives from the standard practice in two-party mediations in which the mediator meets with each party separately before meeting with them together (Susskind 1999). Most dispute resolution practitioners agree that some type of an assessment should be conducted before initiating a collaborative process. However, how to conduct the assessment, and even what to call the process, differs among practitioners. While approaches may differ, the overall purpose of conducting an assessment—to gain a more holistic understanding of the situation, identify involved parties and key issues, assess the prospects for collaboration, and design a plan for next steps—remains consistent (Susskind 1999).

Conflict assessment is the term most frequently used in the dispute resolution field, however, some practitioners refrain from using the term *conflict*, because the participants may not see themselves in conflict or because the use of the word has a negative connotation (Susskind 1999). Other terms used include *convening assessment*, *stakeholder assessment*, *issue assessment*, *systems assessment*, and *situation assessment*. For our purposes we use the term *situation assessment*.

While the term *stakeholder* is common and widely used, it is not accepted by all. It is believed that the term originated during a time of land grabbing in North America when ownership titles were distributed to people who would draw the boundaries of new lands with stakes (Borrini and Jaireth 2007). Since the rights and concerns of indigenous peoples were not respected in those land appropriation processes, the term stakeholder carries a negative connotation. Additionally, native tribes in the United States operate as sovereign nations, while the term stakeholder usually denotes non-sovereign interest groups or individuals. This paper uses *parties* instead.

A. **Why Conduct a Situation Assessment?**

A situation assessment enables a deeper understanding of salient circumstances. The assessment reveals likely barriers to resolving conflicts along with opportunities to effectively address challenges. Interviews focus on the key issues and interests of the people who are, have been, and should be involved in trying to develop solutions. The interviewing stage also allows the exploration of people's incentives and willingness to engage in a collaborative process. The individual(s) conducting the assessment then use this information to determine the feasibility of a collaborative process and how to design the process for the highest likelihood of success. Reasons for conducting a situation assessment include:

- **Better Understand the Circumstances and Relationship Dynamics:** Interviewing a diverse, representative group of individuals involved in the situation provides a more holistic understanding of the history of the situation and the past, current, and potential dynamics among the people, organizations, and institutions involved.
- **Get to Know Involved Parties and Gain Trust:** Interviews help to identify the parties (individuals, groups, and institutions) involved in, affected by, or potentially impacted by an issue or issues. These confidential interviews and candid conversations also allow the individual(s) conducting the assessment to develop rapport

and trust with the participants (Haaland 2008).

- **Identify Key Issues:** Interviews focus on identifying the relevant issues, highlighting the areas of greatest concern and potential approaches for addressing concerns.
- **Assess Capacity:** The individual(s) conducting the assessment gain understanding of the resources and capacities of the individuals, groups, and institutions involved.
- **Ascertain If Facilitated Meetings Would Be Appropriate:** Determine whether or not key parties are willing to work together as a group and whether any have a better alternative to a shared solution or negotiated agreement.
- **Design Effective Processes and Meetings:** Information from the interviews helps to inform the design of an effective process. Gathering important information prior to convening a group allows participants to consider the information as soon as they come together, rather than beginning to generate it at the first meeting (Haaland 2008).

B. **When to Conduct an Assessment**

Situation assessments can be used for a variety of circumstances. Common characteristics of settings wherein an assessment can have positive benefits include:

- Issues characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence—in which any action performed on one element will affect one or more other elements of the situation.
- Issues that cannot be solved by one party working alone, but rather require others' commitment to ensure successful resolution.
- When many parties exist in settings of dispersed authority that are affected, interested, or believe they have a stake in the issue(s).
- When multiple sets of facts or a common information base is not clear or agreed-upon.

- When solutions and implementation will take a long time to develop and/or require concerted efforts by many parties over time.

C. When Not to Conduct an Assessment

Sometimes it is apparent at the onset that circumstances are not conducive to a collaborative process. Before initiating a situation assessment, the individual(s) conducting the assessment should hold preliminary conversations with the entity requesting that a process be convened and any other known, involved parties to gauge whether or not an assessment would be productive. Common characteristics of settings where an alternative approach to a situation assessment may be considered (The William D. Ruckelshaus Center 2017):

- Low level of concern over the issue(s).
- Basic values or principles are the focus of the problem.
- Very quick action is required.
- Resources (e.g., staff time or funding) for an assessment and a facilitated process are insufficient or unavailable.
- Legal clarification is needed or a legal process has been initiated.
- The Extension professional or individuals that will conduct the assessment are not perceived by all parties as impartial.

III. HOW TO CONDUCT A SITUATION ASSESSMENT

While situation assessments may vary due to the unique qualities of a given set of circumstances, most include the following stages and steps (Figure 1).

A. Stage 1. Plan and Prepare

1. Clarify Purpose and Scope

Situation assessments are commonly initiated by a sponsor, which is the primary party interested in having a collaborative process convened. Discussing and agreeing on the purpose, timeline, scope and budget, and expected outcomes of the assessment with the sponsor is a critical first step. Questions to consider include:

- What is the purpose or desired intent of this project, group, meetings, etc.?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What is the purpose for engaging the parties?
- Which parties are essential to include?
- What do you see as your role? Extension's role? The role of the university? How do others see this role?
- If working with a team: what are each team member's roles and responsibilities?
- Are the Extension program and the relevant Extension professional(s) seen as neutral and independent enough that all affected/involved parties will trust the process and accept the role of the Extension professional(s) as an impartial/neutral third party?

2. Conduct Background Research

Next, the individual(s) conducting the assessment should conduct background research. This should include collecting information about the history of the situation, a preliminary list of involved parties, information regarding the relationships among parties, issues, and the language or key terms parties use to describe the situation (Susskind 1999). Some questions to consider include:

- What is the history of the situation? How has it influenced/led to the current circumstances?
- What are the policies, laws, structures, etc. that exist with this situation? How do they influence the situation? Are there statutes, regulations, or policies that govern action in this situation? Is there flexibility?
- Who are the parties involved? Who is or may be affected by the situation? Who is responsible for making decisions? Who may be able to block potential decisions?
- What assumptions, beliefs, values, and positions do people hold about the situation?
- Have there been attempts made in the past to address the situation? If yes, who was involved? What was or were the results of past efforts?
- Are any of the characteristics present from the "when not to conduct an assessment" list?

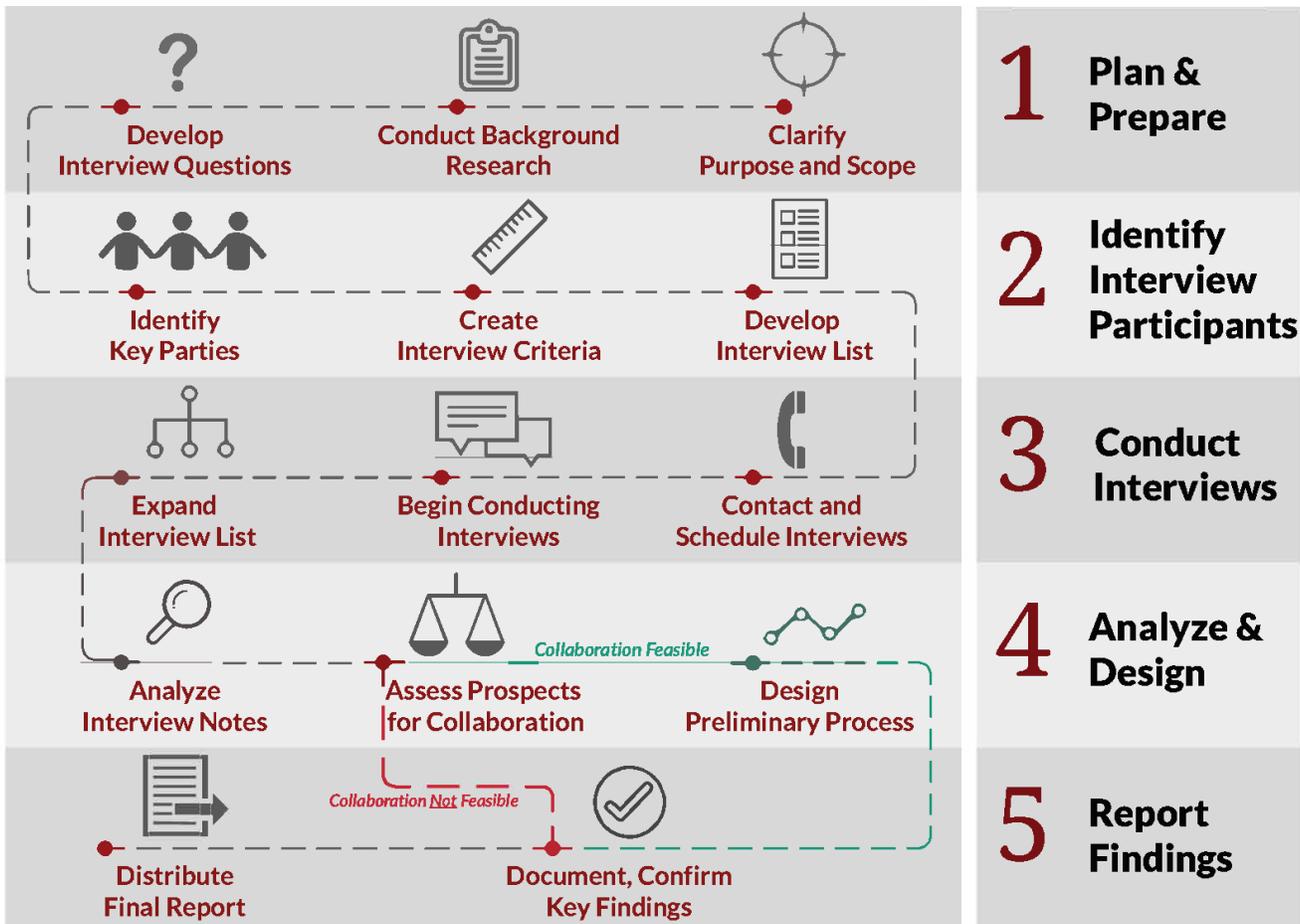


Figure 1. The situation assessment framework: stages and steps of a situation assessment. Designed by Amanda Murphy, The William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

3. Develop Interview Questions

A situation assessment uses a consistent set and sequence of questions, which the interviewer asks of each interview participants. Interviewers can ask additional unscripted questions to pursue insightful lines of thinking or common themes, or to elicit useful details as needed. Provided is an example of interview questions, in logical order:

1. Describe the current circumstances regarding...
2. Imagine it is X (5, 10, 25, 50) years from now and efforts to address this issue have been successful. How would you know? What will have happened or not happened?
3. What are the challenges or barriers that make it difficult to get to this future success?
4. How might these challenges or barriers be overcome?
5. Do you have suggestions for approaches or processes that would be most useful in addressing the issues you identified and why?
6. What changes, if any, to existing efforts might you recommend for addressing the issue(s) in the long term?
7. What do you think will happen if the “status quo” continues?
8. Are you aware of, or have you participated in, any efforts or processes that you think could in some way serve as a model?
9. What kind of information exists about the issues you mentioned? What kind of information is needed? What kinds of information can you provide?
10. If a group were to be convened to address these issues, who would you recommend participate? Would you be willing to participate?
11. Who would you recommend convene the group? Who would you recommend facilitate

the group? What would they need to know or do to ensure the process would be effective as possible?

12. Who else do you think it would be important to interview and why?

It is important to note that Extension professionals may need to go through a University review process, since structured or semi-structured interview efforts are often considered human subject research. If so, institutional review of protocols may be required to ensure safeguards are in place to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

B. Stage 2. Identify Interview Participants

1. Identify Key Parties

To gain a comprehensive understanding of circumstances, the individual(s) conducting the assessment will want to interview one or more people from each identifiable viewpoint or position. An initial list of key parties can be compiled in the preliminary conversations held for the purpose of determining whether or not a situation assessment will be productive. Examples of key parties may include:

- Government (city, county, state, federal, tribal, and other local governments).
- Business or industry sector representatives.
- Research (e.g., scientific or technical specialists), potentially at academic institutions.
- Local community representatives.
- Media.
- Nonprofit organizations.
- Landowners.
- Philanthropic organizations.
- Nonprofit or other non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

2. Create Criteria for Selecting Individuals to Interview

The next step is to develop criteria to identify interview participants. In many cases, it would be impossible to interview every party due to the large numbers of organizations and people interested or affected. In these cases, the interview list is not

meant to be exhaustive but rather representative. The goal is for all interested and affected parties to have confidence that, whether they were interviewed or not, their perspective is represented on the interview list and in the assessment. Having criteria helps narrow down who needs to be interviewed and provides explanation for why or why not someone or some party was included in the interview process.

Example criteria:

- Broadly representative of the interests affecting and affected by the issue.
- Geographically dispersed.
- Representative of the diverse perspectives and views on past and future efforts.
- Representative of varied tenure.
- Organizational and subject matter expertise and leadership.
- Fits within project funding and timeline.

3. Develop Interview List and Initial Set of Participants to Interview

The sponsor may provide a list of individuals to interview, but it is the role of the individual(s) conducting the assessment to ultimately decide on whom to interview. The sponsor list, in combination with individuals identified during Stage 1, should be collected into one potential interview participants list. Using the interview criteria, an initial set or first tier of participants to interview can be selected.

C. Stage 3: Conduct Interviews

1. Contact and Schedule Interviews

Once the individual(s) conducting the assessment are ready to begin interviewing, an introduction letter or email should be sent to the first wave of interview participants. The introduction letter or email should include a high-level description of the assessment, information about the interview process, an estimate of the time the interview will take, and how the information will be used. A copy of the interview questions should also be included so participants have time to think about their responses in advance of the interview. If no response is received within a few days, follow up with a phone call to schedule an interview.

Once an interview is confirmed, a confirmation email should be sent to the interview participants with the following information:

- Confirmation of date, time, location, or call details (the phone number that the interviewer will be calling them at or conference line information).
- Name of person that will be conducting the interview.
- Background information, as relevant.
- Interview location and directions—as appropriate.

2. Begin Conducting Interviews

Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or by telephone, depending on the time and scope of the assessment and the preference of the individual(s) being interviewed. Some participants may request that others from their organization or interest group participate in the interview. In these cases, confirm whether everyone involved would be comfortable with a group interview and that they would feel free to openly share their thoughts in such a setting. If not, stick with an individual interview.

At the start of the interview, introduce the interviewer(s) and note taker, and review the interview and university protocols. Ask the participant(s) if they have had a chance to review the background information and questions then see if they have any questions about the assessment or interview. Provide a brief overview of the process and purpose of the assessment.

Next, explain how the information gathered from the interviews will be used. In most cases, information gathered from interviews will be summarized in an assessment report; however, specific statements are not attributed to individual interview participants. This confidentiality encourages candor and protects individuals from any potential negative consequences related to their statements. This information should be provided to participants before starting the interview and participants should be asked to confirm that they are willing to continue with the interview.

It is important to treat the interviews like conversations. Let the interview questions give

structure to and guide the conversation, but be flexible and adapt them to the discussion as needed and ask follow up questions. If doable, use a team of two interviewers. It helps to have one person lead the interview while another takes notes. Accurate notes are crucial; while it is not necessary to write down every word said, it is important to capture key points in sentence structure that will make sense to both the notetaker and interviewer when revisited later. Document important ideas and findings as soon as possible after every interview. Use a clear, established record-keeping protocol to retain the data acquired in each interview without attaching names to information or responses that could reveal attribution.

3. Expand Interview List

Throughout the interviewing phase, a chain-referral recruitment method can be used to identify additional interview participants. This method involves asking each interview participant who else would be important to interview and why. Each individual recommended should be added to the interview list. Cross-checking against the interview criteria, a second set or tier of interviews can be identified. When an organization or individual is suggested multiple times, especially from diverse parties, they should be added to the next tier of interviewees. The process for identifying and selecting interview participants can be thought of as moving outward in concentric circles or waves, which helps ensure that all possible interests are included (Susskind 1999).

D. Stage 4. Analyze and Design

1. Analyze Interview Notes

After completing the interviews, the individual(s) conducting the assessment will have a sense of whether or not a collaborative process would be productive. It is important to analyze and synthesize the interview notes in a methodical way, both to confirm initial impressions and minimize bias (Susskind 1999). A variety of qualitative data analysis techniques and technology can be used.

A “constant comparative method” can be used to pinpoint important themes. The first step is to read through all responses to each interview question and identify key themes for each question. Themes from each question can be compared to one another and then refined and modified. From this process, core themes emerge. These themes may emerge due to frequent mention, may connect with other themes, or may be notable for their diversity, uniqueness, or originality. Examining themes with a consistent set of analysis questions can help. Such questions may include:

- Are there recurring ideas or trends?
- Are there notable differences of opinion?
- Are there notable shared opinions or areas of agreement?
- How emotionally charged is the situation?
- How controversial are the Issues?
- Are there conflicts among the proposed participants?
- Are there metrics or aspects about the future success that participants share? Do not share?

The final assessment report should include a summary of these “key findings”. It is important to note that the summary of key findings may represent a wide range of interview responses due to the qualitative nature of the assessment and analysis process. The goal is to provide a summary of findings relevant to addressing the identified challenges, not an exhaustive list or detailed explanation of all perspectives and ideas.

2. Assess the Prospects of Initiating a Collaborative Process

Once key findings are summarized, the individual(s) conducting the assessment will gauge the prospects for a collaborative process. Conditions that limit the prospects for collaboration include (Susskind 1999; Weber 2006; Schenk 2007):

- No or few areas of agreement or opportunities for tradeoffs.
- Insufficient time for the process to be conducted; unrealistic deadline for a group decision or product.
- One or more key parties refuses to participate.

- Participants believe their interests can be better met via other methods, such as litigation.
- Inadequate resources for the process and for implementation.
- The sponsor cannot give the neutral convener/facilitator adequate autonomy.
- Power imbalances among participants are too great.
- There is no pressure (such as a deadline, interest among participants, or political mandate) to form a collaborative process.
- One or more key parties is unidentifiable or lacks a legitimate spokesperson.
- Issues focus on constitutional rights.

If Collaborative Process is Feasible, Design Preliminary Process

Ideally, the assessment will identify shared views on what should happen in both the short and long term to resolve differences and address issues. Based on this information, a preliminary process can be designed. This preliminary process design should take the form of recommendations in the assessment report. These recommendations may be modified based on suggestions from participants. Ultimately, any successful collaborative process will require the group to take ownership of the process. Providing a preliminary process design in the assessment report is the starting point. In general, recommendations should include (Susskind 1999; Weber 2006; Schenk 2007):

- Proposed purpose and goals of the process.
- A proposed agenda of issues to be addresses, including any issues that are potentially non-negotiable or not to be included in the scope of the process.
- Entities that should participate, and also process and procedures for selecting individuals.
- Resources needed to support the collaborative effort.
- Scientific, technical, or other information and fact-finding needs.
- Timeframe for the process.

- Collaboration training or relationship building efforts that may be needed before the process is initiated.
- Suggested ground rules, operating procedures, and decision-making process.

If Collaboration Is Not Likely to Produce Successful Outcomes, Report Findings and Disengage

An assessment may reveal a collaborative process is not feasible. In this case, the final report should include an explanation for why a collaborative process is not recommended using as clear and transparent language as possible. If applicable, this explanation should include recommendations for constructive next steps or ways in which collaborative capacity might be built. Constructive next steps might include joint fact finding to establish a common information base, alternatives to collaboration, such as legislative or judicial remedies, collaboration training, collaborative capacity and relationship building, or substantive policy or administrative changes to address identified challenges.

It may be that the assessment reveals that a collaborative process is feasible, but the Extension professional conducting the assessment is not able to serve as the convener of the process or is seen by participants as biased. Even if preliminary conversations indicate a high level of trust in Extension among sponsors and key parties, sometimes the assessment shows that specific people with other involved organizations do not have the same comfort with Extension. In this instance, Extension professionals should disengage by transparently (while protecting the confidentiality of respondents) acknowledging whatever factors do not support collaboration convened and guided by them. Openly articulating any factors that do not support an Extension-facilitated collaboration will allow

interested parties to understand the rationale for Extension disengaging from the process. Having gathered suggestions for acceptable facilitators, in the event that Extension is not seen as acceptable, will assist the parties in moving toward a constructive outcome, nonetheless.

E. Stage 5. Report Findings

1. Document Key Findings and Confirm with Participants

The assessment report should include a summary of common themes on salient issues, explain different perspectives, summarize perceptions of the information base, describe the prospects for a collaborative process, and provide preliminary process recommendations or next steps. A copy of the draft report should be mailed or emailed to everyone interviewed, with a request that they review for factual accuracy. This step serves to ensure that interview participants' perspectives are represented accurately and that all key issues were identified.

Given that different parties can hold differing views of the situation and "the facts," there may be times when interview participants provide conflicting comments or give input outside the scope of the assessment. It is important to follow up with each participant providing input and to explain the rationale for whether, and how, their input is being addressed in the final report.

2. Distribute Final Report

After confirming the facts of the report with interview participants, a final copy of the report should be sent to all individuals that participated in the assessment along with any other interested parties. It is important to provide transparency about any changes to the key themes or other substantive areas that were made based on participant input. The rationale for changes can be provided in the final report as a footnote and in the final report distribution letter or email.

IV. CONCLUSION

Collaborative processes can be used to assist communities facing complex issues. When thoughtfully designed and well managed, these processes can help bring people together to identify common interests, build trust and social capital, and develop and implement shared solutions. Effective collaboration can also build the capacity of communities to solve future challenges. Situation assessment is an effective tool to identify involved parties and key issues, and to determine the feasibility and design of the collaborative process. Extension professionals play an important role in ensuring that collaborative processes are designed and conducted for the greatest likelihood of success.

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