HANDBOOK
Non-formal Adult Education Facilitators

MODULE TWO
Identification of Learning Needs
Module One focused on the community. This module looks at individual learners. In particular, we will see what learners want to learn and how we facilitators can find out about this.

It will help us a lot if we know the needs of our learners. What are their backgrounds? What are the conditions of their lives? What have they learned in the past? What current skills and knowledge do they have? What are their future needs? If we know our learners’ needs, we can better provide learning experiences that match these. We can also find out more easily if they have really learned anything.

The following sections in this module will help us to get information about individual learning needs:

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“I wonder if the literacy class will help me learn about better ways to look after my cows? That is what I really need.”
Section 1: Why is it important to identify learning needs?

Both Siti and Mila are facilitators. Although they started their centres at the same time and have worked hard, Siti’s centre has a great deal of enthusiasm and interest, but not Mila’s. Why are they different?

Mila organized a meeting in the community and invited people to join the centre. She particularly encouraged illiterate people to enrol in the literacy programme. Twenty people indicated interest. She started the class five days a week with books and curriculum supplied by the district coordinator. She administered monthly tests using tools provided by the district office and prepared reports based on the test scores. She noticed that attendance was not always good. Some people stopped coming. Sometimes they were not very interested in what she was teaching. Also, the test results for some were not as good as she had hoped. She wondered what the problem was.

Siti visited many homes to talk with potential learners before organizing a community meeting to explain her centre. She got to know a lot about the people and their lives, not just their literacy levels but also their families, work and health. Before starting the learning sessions, she tried to understand the literacy skills of each learner and what they wanted and needed. She found that each learner had different literacy skills and expectations. She planned the learning activities, taking into account individual needs and differences. Although she was using centrally supplied textbooks and curriculum, she also used additional materials. She planned the lessons according to the individual levels of the learners. During class time, she also tried to find out the needs and problems the learners were having and made changes in the following sessions accordingly. The learners were active and attended classes regularly.
What do these two examples show us?

Learning will be most effective when people have an opportunity to learn things that relate to their lives and their needs.

People want to improve their lives and the lives of their families. So their interests will be dominated by their own and their family’s needs.

Sometimes people do not always see the linkage between learning and their needs. Our role is to help learners make this connection. This will be easier if we relate learning to prior experience and current relevance.

Our literacy and numeracy programmes should be built around our learners’ needs, interests and daily practices. This way functional literacy and numeracy skills become tools that people can use to further improve their lives and satisfy their needs. We have to identify these needs as they relate to the use of reading, writing and arithmetic in the daily lives of learners.
Examination of learning needs helps us to facilitate purposeful and useful learning. It also helps us to identify the level of our learners’ literacy and numeracy skills, thus allowing us to adapt curriculum, select relevant learning materials and to plan appropriate learning activities. Once we know the problems and needs of the learners, we can address them.

To measure learning we need to know first what our learners already know. Unless we do this, we cannot easily identify each learner’s progress. We should keep detailed records for each learner. These will allow us, with the help of the learner, to check learning and see what progress is being made.

Identification of learning needs also helps us in our future planning. Knowing about an individual learner’s needs, we can plan specific reading, writing, numeracy and life skill activities for that learner.

Activity

What do you think are the benefits of identifying the learning needs of your learner?
Section 2: How can we identify what our learners already know?

Chai went from house to house to talk to people who might attend his literacy class. He wanted to find out more about them, particularly what they already knew about different things before they started the sessions.

He wrote down a few questions to help him in this process. The questions covered issues such as:

- Health
- Previous education
- Farming
- Sanitation
- Personal hygiene
- Child education
- Wages
- Women’s rights
- Role of local government
- Citizens rights

Using the information he got from the interviews, Chai prepared posters and other materials to help him further assess the prior knowledge of the learners. He invited the people he had talked to and who had shown interest to attend the learning centre in groups. He identified those who could read and write individual letters, words and sentences. He followed a similar process in assessing numeracy skills.

He kept a record of his results.
What can we learn from Chai?

In the example above, Chai moves from identifying learning needs to the next step of the process, identifying what learners already know. Chai has his own way of doing this through interviews in people’s houses and some information collection activities at his centre. Chai’s methods reflect an understanding that all adult learners have existing knowledge and skills because of their life experiences, even those adults who may not be literate. It is important for Chai to know what prior learning his learners have so that he can prepare appropriate and relevant materials for his literacy programmes. It is also helpful for him to identify the existing literacy levels of his learners.

Identification of prior learning is an important adult learning principle. Your learners will feel encouraged to contribute to their own learning when they realize that they themselves have something to offer as well as others. Also, when you plan a programme around learners’ existing knowledge, you do not have to teach things again. However, it does take a little effort to collect this information and to adapt your teaching to match an individual’s existing knowledge.

Activity

What techniques can we use to identify prior learning? Add to this list some more techniques that you can use.

- Interview
- Observation
- Questionnaire
Section 3: Who can we work with to discover learning needs?

We have many partners

In my village, a non-government organization (NGO) first approached us to identify the needs of the community. As the first step, the community representatives, policy makers, elders and schoolteachers discussed the need to identify the concerns of our community as well as the ways to identify these concerns.

As a second step, I, a facilitator, collected data with the help of people such as the schoolteachers, government officials and others in the community. These people had various data and also some good ideas. Some of them visited others in the community to find out first hand what the people wanted.

After this initial process I was able to prepare programmes and learning materials according to the local requirements, events and social customs in the learner’s daily lives.

Community members can help too

I am the literacy coordinator in my village. In order to find out about the needs of the learners, the whole community gathered together in a meeting. Thus we were able to identify common issues faced by individuals, as well as those that were affecting the whole community. For example, we confirmed that finding drinking water was a common problem for the village. By sharing each other’s concerns, the people together began to find alternatives to solve their common problems.

I realized that many of the problems and issues raised by the community at this meeting could be dealt with in my literacy class.
What can we learn from these villages?

These two examples show us that we can involve others in finding out what our community and learners’ needs are. There are different groups from whom we can get support:

- learners themselves
- members of the community, such as local politicians, teachers, decision makers, parents and village elders
- facilitators and literacy coordinators
- voluntary agencies and NGOs
- government officials working in development
- doctors, health and rehabilitation workers
- the whole community
The most important of these are the learners themselves. The learners will find the learning interesting only when it concerns their daily lives. So it is necessary to talk to the learners, individually and as a group, in order to identify the issues that concern them. When learners are involved in these processes, they are more likely to make full use of the literacy centre.

In addition, the various government departments and NGOs can be a rich source of information. As facilitators we can seek support from these groups not only to identify needs but to help enrich the learning process. Many of these organizations have the same goal as we do -- to help people. When we co-ordinate our efforts, it is possible that we can do more than if we work separately. Also, these people are often aware of the local issues and can contribute to finding solutions.
In most villages, there are different agencies working with the villagers. People from these agencies have in-depth knowledge of the local issues. They also know about the different resources available in the village. Most importantly, these agencies are able to win the confidence of the local people and often involve some of them as facilitators. By making contact and working with these groups and individuals, we become part of a bigger and stronger network.

In the case of people with disabilities, we need to consult with local doctors, as well as health and rehabilitation workers, to identify their specific needs. Those who have physical, visual, and intellectual disabilities have different needs. The knowledge of these experts can help us understand the causes of disabilities so that we can design appropriate programmes.

Other groups that can be helpful in identifying needs are the local youth clubs, women’s groups and other local organizations. The members of these groups can also be actively involved in the teaching and learning processes of the literacy centre if you win their cooperation.
Activity

List some people and groups that could help you identify learning needs:

____________________________________

____________________________________

____________________________________
Section 4: How do we know what our learners want to learn?

The learners in Mohan’s basic literacy programme are illiterate women aged 15-45. Each one has different learning needs and priorities. Mohan asked the women to answer the following questions:

Why did you enrol in the literacy class?
What would you like to learn?

Mohan wrote down all the answers. He put them into these into four categories:

1. Specific reading skills
2. Specific writing skills
3. Numeracy skills
4. Awareness issues and functional skills (including vocational skills)

Mohan then discussed and analyzed these learning needs with the learners. They came up with a list of what they believed to be the most important things to know first.
What can we learn from Mohan?

We know that learners have individual learning needs (and that others can help us assess these needs). They also have different literacy levels. We need to know these needs before planning our literacy programme. We also need to prioritize them - which needs are the most important and should be addressed first? The results of our needs assessment can help us to plan our literacy programme. We can also use them to develop appropriate learning materials and to select teaching-learning strategies suited to the learners.

Most importantly, we need to involve the learners directly in the process of needs assessment. We need to ask them and get their help in prioritizing their learning needs.

What other methods can we use to identify future learning needs?

There are many methods that can be used to identify learning needs. Here are some you might consider.

**Interview:** A face-to-face dialogue where the facilitator asks questions in order to obtain the learner’s views about certain issues.

**Meta-cards:** The learners write down what they want to learn on cards or slips of paper. Afterward, learners discuss the responses.
Questionnaire: Each learner answers questions from a prepared list in order to provide information about his or her learning needs.

Individual learning plan: Each learner identifies individual learning goals and a plan for attaining them. The plan can include reasons for learning, times she or he prefers to study, methods to be used, etc.

The New Participatory Method: Individuals write their learning choices on pieces of paper, which are grouped according to functional areas on a wall chart. The content of the literacy programme or course is based on these individual choices.
Activity

What experience in assessing learning needs have you had?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

How did you identify these needs?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

What kind of learning needs were you able to identify?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Try one method that you have not used before. Good luck.
Section 5: How can we identify and prioritize community problems and needs?

Siti would like to start a “reflect circle” (a brainstorming technique) with her group. Members of the community can use this technique to “reflect upon” (think about) community problems and come up with solutions that require an improvement in overall literacy and numeracy skills. However, even though she lives in the community, she does not clearly understand the basic problems of that community.

The first thing Siti did was to walk through the whole village to familiarize herself with it. After this, she sat with a large number of people under a tree. Men, women, boys and girls gathered there. She divided the villagers into four groups: young men, old men, young women and old women.
Each group constructed four different lists of problems. Here is how they did it:

1. Each group began by identifying and discussing the problems. Each group drew or wrote down the problems on small pieces of paper, which were then put together as a list.

2. Each group then gave each problem a score (1-16) by using bean seeds and placing them beside each item on the list. The problem they considered most urgent had 16 seeds beside it. The problem they considered least urgent had only 1 seed. For example, they considered water supply as the most urgent problem in their community (16 seeds) and illiteracy as the least urgent (1 seed). There was a lot of discussion.

3. One of the groups ended up with the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low prices</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large families</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work load</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water supply</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illiteracy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanitation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dowries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fuel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children’s health</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Each group presented its findings to the other groups and the other community people. The other people provided their views. The four lists were then finalized. The community people kept these lists for their future planning and action. Siti took note of the findings and other major points to assist in planning the local curriculum and the development of the learning session plans.
5. The groups then gathered their lists together and came up with a new list of their prioritized problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>water supply</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low prices</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large families</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work load</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>dowries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fuel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children’s health</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illiteracy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What did Siti learn from this exercise?

It is particularly useful in identifying and prioritizing problems. Everyone has a chance to contribute and share their ideas. Different age groups in the community have different perceptions. The facilitator should introduce the exercise carefully and in a relaxed manner. The exercise can reveal widely differing priorities.

In this example, the four groups came up with the following different priorities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young Men</th>
<th>Old Men</th>
<th>Young Women</th>
<th>Old Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of credit</td>
<td>Lack of work</td>
<td>Water supply</td>
<td>Ill health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low wages</td>
<td>No credit</td>
<td>Low prices</td>
<td>Poor care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pests</td>
<td>Lack of respect</td>
<td>Work load</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drought</td>
<td>Poor soils</td>
<td>Dowry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erosion</td>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Poor roads</td>
<td>Sanitation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
<td>Children’s health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Illiteracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further discussion is required to identify what needs are felt to be important by the whole community. Then the facilitator needs to see how these needs might be solved or partly solved by an education programme, in particular a literacy programme. Successful ways to address these needs usually require some kind of education or training, and literacy can be a part of this learning.
Where else can this exercise be used?

It can be used in a number of circumstances. For example:

We can use it to prioritize individual learning needs.
We can use it to develop an action plan to solve specific problems.
Community members can use it to make decisions related to crop selection and management, preventive health measures and other areas of community life.

Activity

I think the most important things about prioritizing community needs are:

We should involve learners and community people in identifying needs because

Needs can be identified by other methods, such as group discussion or focus discussion. Can you think of any more?
Section 6: How can we benefit from finding out about learning needs?

Mila went to the literacy class and observed that some of her learners looked pale. She found out that they were suffering from diarrhoea. “What should I do?” she asked herself.

The next morning, she brought some posters and learning materials related to the sickness and discussed with her learners the following topics:
- What are the causes of diarrhoea?
- What should you do when you get diarrhoea?

Mila and her learners discussed the problem and decided they wanted to learn about:
- The methods of diarrhoea prevention
- Instructions about taking medicine
- How to read and write simple words about health issues

Mila brought some flip chart to her class and they started to learn about the methods of diarrhoea prevention. Her learners were very happy that they could solve their problem. Mila asked them to read and write some key words and sentences found on the posters. They read the instructions for taking medicine. Later, she found that her learners had improved their literacy skills and at the same time improved their health and quality of life.
What can we learn from Mila’s experience?

Mila has discovered that her learners are able to improve their literacy skills as well as their quality of life. When she can identify her learner’s needs and conduct activities relevant to their needs, the learners are happy. Mila realizes that identification of learning needs is necessary not only to conduct learning activities, but also to prepare the learning plan that has guidelines for these activities. How to develop learning plans or a local curriculum is addressed in more detail in the next module.

In conclusion, in order to have an effective literacy programme, we need to identify the individual learning needs of learners enrolled in the centre. We also have to find out the community’s overall learning needs.

Thus we need to know the following:

Existing skills of learners in:
- Reading
- Writing
- Numeracy

Current state of:
- Functional awareness
- Occupational expertise
- Attitudes and values

Expected levels of:
- Reading
- Writing
- Numeracy
- Functional knowledge
- Occupational skills
- Attitudes and values

This information can help us to:
- review the proposed curriculum and learning materials to see how appropriate they are to the learners and to the local situation
- identify the problems that can be addressed by the programme
- classify the learners according to their level of ability
- assess the progress of individual learners and take any required steps
- motivate learners to attend classes regularly
Exercise

List the most common learning needs of your learners. Prepare a list of learning needs for individual learners on a separate sheet of paper.
Concluding Remarks

The learning needs of adults are different from those of children. They are more varied and complex, depending on conditions in the community and the life experiences of learners.

That’s why we have employed various needs assessment methods or techniques to find out what are the specific needs of learners.

Some of the methods introduced in this module may look difficult. In that case, we suggest that you contact local NGOs or experts who have some experience with these exercises.