

Background Information in Planning

Usual procedures involving people in planning are not likely to result in decisions with direct relationship to facts presented

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This article is about background information and its effective use in Extension program development. There are many reasons why information presented to planning groups fails to serve the intended purpose; one is the manner in which such information is handled—or mishandled. Its proper use is derived from the decision-making model (or problem-solving process). The analysis of the topic presented here is based on research findings and the author's experience as a participant and observer in many planning efforts. A proposal is developed for improving the planning process, utilizing two models.

THE NEED or purpose of background information for Extension program planning has long been recognized. Its purpose can be derived from the models of the decision-making or problem-solving processes. Translating the *analysis of the situation* step in decision making requires identifying, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data relevant to the problem at hand. Sound decision making cannot occur unless the right background information is used in the right manner at the right time.

An examination of past experiences in the uses of background information in the Extension program planning process¹¹ suggests several inadequacies. Shortcomings surveyed in the following com-

¹¹See Ronald C. Powers, "Degree to Which an Iowa County's Program Planning Process Met Selected Criteria" (unpublished Master's thesis, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1960). See also chapter by same title and author in George M. Beal (ed.), *Social Action and Interaction in Program Planning* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press (forthcoming, June, 1966); Ronald C. Powers, "County Program Development: A Conceptual Model," in *Proceedings of National Extension Training Conference* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University, 1963). The author has also led several workshops and seminars related to the phases of program development.

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ments are a combination of research findings and the author's experiences as a participant and observer in many Extension program planning efforts. Based on these identified shortcomings, a proposal will be developed in this paper for improving the program planning process. Two models will be used for that purpose.

An underlying problem in the proper use of background information is inherent in the conventional planning process itself, as noted by Bruce.² One means of dramatizing the restrictions of conventional Extension planning methods is comparing them with the methods of a business corporation. In Extension, the planning process is usually carried out at a particular time of year, with deadlines for program statements, plans of work, and the like. In corporations, planning is a continuous function, usually with a staff assigned to do that alone. Deadlines are established for project plans, but not for the over-all planning. There is a continuous feeding in of new data and modifying of previous decisions as necessary.

In Extension, there is usually a high turnover of people involved in local planning, thus no build-up or carryover from one group to the next. To insure turnover, a rotation pattern is usually established. Each planning process starts at approximately zero in relation to committee member understanding of the situation. Then, with a predetermined planning period, the committee must turn out a product (a program statement or similar document). In a corporation, tenure of planners is purposefully sought in order to obtain continuity and accumulate a "pool of knowledge." Research and development activities constitute significant segments of most corporation budgets.

Finally, each local Extension staff often gathers its own information, puts it together in its own way, and uses it in the fashion believed best. Corporations usually have central information gathering and analysis units.

THE USUAL PROCEDURE

The usual procedure for involving lay people on planning committees is unlikely to result in decisions regarding priority problems that have many direct relationships to the facts presented. Committees usually meet only three or four times, receiving background information in one "two-hour convulsion of facts and figures." The following observations seem relevant:

² R. L. Bruce, "A Look at Program Planning," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Winter, 1964), 221-25. Bruce notes the elements of the conventional planning procedures and offers several criticisms, including the manner of using background information.

1. Lay committee members receiving information in the usual way—a concentrated set of facts, figures, charts, etc.—usually judge the presentation of background information as “interesting” but do not see it as an integral part of the planning process or use the data in actual committee deliberations. In research conducted by the author,³ where background information was presented as indicated above, committee members (in six committees studied) did not overtly refer to any of the background information in their deliberations about program priorities.
2. The procedure of examining chart after chart of facts—ranging from fertilizer use to 4-H dropouts—is highly suspect from the standpoint of committee members “learning” anything that will help them make good decisions. Research on memory and retention provides little evidence to recommend the common method of “looking at” background information.⁴
3. Gathering background data frequently becomes an end in itself rather than a means. County D collects all the data used by counties A, B, and C, and adds to them. County E repeats the process. The result is larger and “jazzier” books of background information which have little or no utility in the task at hand.

It is too much to expect a planning committee to recommend a priority educational effort on the safe use of chemicals after members have listened to an array of facts and figures, including such items as number of 4-H dropouts, miles of terrace, per cent of homes with flush toilets, tons of fertilizer used, average incomes, and incidents of chemical poisoning last year. Though this problem is most serious with a planning committee concerned with a wide scope of problems (such as a community development committee), it is also serious with more specific committees. A commodity committee is usually exposed to volumes of data regarding that commodity—much of which is irrelevant.

Suggested elements contributing to failure in Extension program planning are the following:

1. Background information as currently utilized is not presented in a framework which shows *interrelationships* necessary for understanding and subsequent identification of priority problems.
2. It is frequently just presented—not analyzed and interpreted. Emphasis has been on the figures and charts rather than on the meaning of data.

³ Ronald C. Powers, unpublished Master's thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁴ See Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, *Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964) esp. Chapter 5.

3. It has generally been presented in one concentrated dose rather than developed from general to the specific during several meetings.
4. Information collection and preparation has often been decentralized and random, thus decreasing the utility of the data and the efficiency of the total Extension staff.

AN ALTERNATIVE

The following proposal is suggested as a means of correcting the problems outlined above. Parts of the proposal will impinge upon existing Extension philosophy and policy, particularly conventional planning procedures. In this discussion Extension philosophy and policy are considered variables (with the assumption that philosophy and policy can be changed when it can be demonstrated that the objectives of Extension can be more effectively achieved).

The basic task is to determine the most effective and efficient way of using background data in identifying major problems and generating the most important objectives. Since objectives and problems are inseparable, it becomes necessary to find means of classifying possible clientele problems in such a manner that committees of lay people can make meaningful comparisons as they attempt to establish priorities.

The purpose in gathering background information is to provide a means of comparing present use of resources with the desired use. Any gaps between present and desired use represent problems. Consequently, the following become criteria for resolving the question of which problems Extension shall tackle: relative importance of the problems; the extent to which the problems can be approached educationally; the degree to which problems fit under the policy and scope of Extension; and the amount of resources.

Imbalance Model

Imbalances represented in Figure 1 are one means of identifying general problems of clientele. The Imbalance Model assumes the existence of problems or gaps. The analysis of background data quantifies the extent to which these imbalances exist. Implicitly, the model suggests that a fuller use of available resources—i.e., the correction of existing imbalances—will increase total human satisfaction and, furthermore, that this is an acceptable objective for Extension programs wherever education is a means to that end.

Those who feel this model is slanted only toward agriculture or

social and economic development need only to conceptualize their concern at an appropriate level to fit the model. Home economics, for example, is concerned mainly with the family as an institution. Within this context several imbalances could be specified—imbalances in nutrition, clothing, family finances, recreation. Human imbalances related to home economics can be handled as they are; thus, family attitudes, skills, and/or information may be imbalanced. As an organization 4-H also falls in the institutional area. Inadequate numbers and types of 4-H Clubs relative to the location and needs of potential members can be an imbalance.

IMBALANCES*	EXAMPLES
STRUCTURAL	
A. Production	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Agriculture — inappropriate labor-to-capital ratios. 2. Manufacturing — imbalance between job opportunities, types of training, and new entrants to labor force.
B. Services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Retail trade — number and location of many retail stores out of balance with number, location, and demand of customers. 2. Health — number and location of clinics, hospitals, specialists, and senior-citizen housing facilities out of balance with number, location, and health problems of people.
C. Institutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Church — number, location, and program quality of churches not balanced with number, location, and needs of members. 2. School — number, location, and curriculum not balanced with number, location, and needed training of students. 3. Government — structure, operation, and location of government facilities lagging behind technology of record keeping, movement of people, and improved transportation and communication.
HUMAN	
A. Skills and abilities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Adults with skills that are in declining occupations. 2. Young people not being trained for emerging occupational demand structure.
B. Attitudes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tendency to believe that individual and community are helpless in face of changes. 2. Tendency to resist change without analyzing possible gains.
C. Information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of information to make sound individual decisions about resource use. 2. Lack of information to make sound group decisions about resource use.

*Basic source of this framework taken from Eber Eldridge, *Imbalances in Rural America* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, Area 2, April, 1963).

Figure 1. Imbalance Model: imbalances in structural and human resource use.

The Imbalance Model permits a comparison of 4-H, home economics, agriculture, and main street business in an over-all perspective. It should be clearly stated, however, that the Model is most useful at the level of over-all planning committees, councils, and advisory boards.

Figure 2 summarizes the "flow" between structural and human imbalances, population mobility, and the general objective of increasing human satisfaction. The geographic locus of the system may be a single population center, a county, or a multi-county area. With some modifications this notion can be applied to committees concerned with total resource development, recreation and tourism, agriculture, youth, or senior citizens.

Figure 2 further suggests the kind of data to be collected and the interrelationships to be developed during the analysis. It also properly identifies the role of population change as both a cause and effect. New technology in agriculture, for example, can effect population movements. These movements in turn can cause other imbalances. These comments seem particularly appropriate since popula-

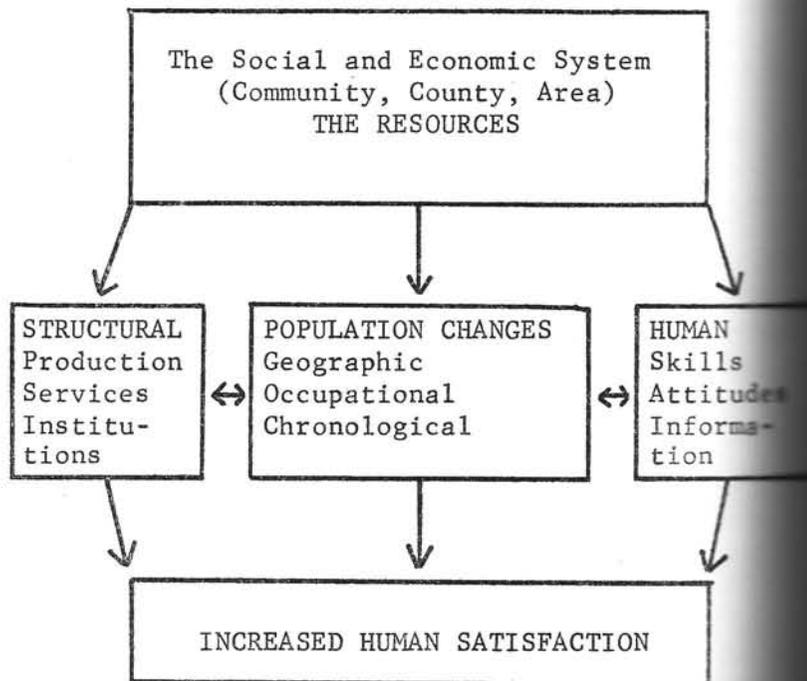


Figure 2. Interrelationships of data on human and structural imbalances, population changes, and increased human satisfaction.

These data are frequently used as a major source of background information. What is frequently ignored, however, is the interrelationship of population change to other kinds of social and economic change—for example, farm size, retail sales, school enrollment, and so on.

The state of balance between human and structural resources at any given time determines the human satisfaction being realized. To the extent that more satisfaction could be attained through a reallocation of resources, there is a series of gaps or problems to work on. Whether or not these gaps are identified and ranked in meaningful priority depends upon our capacity to effectively utilize background information within the framework noted above.

Flow Model

Another issue central to this proposal is the relationship between the use of background information, the organization (committee formation and maintenance) for planning, and the flow or time sequence of the planning process. Figure 3 is intended to help clarify several important ideas. The flow of the planning process is represented in six stages. Stages I and II are concerned with organizational aspects and, as such, are not the primary focus of this paper. A few summary remarks about these two stages are in order, however:

1. The people selected, the number, and method used will all have a bearing on the ultimate success of the committee.
2. Similarly, the manner of orientation, the "mix" of the people, the extent to which they become a social group, and the time schedule imposed upon them will determine their effectiveness—in terms of task performance as well as member satisfaction.⁵
3. The usual practice in committee formation is to begin by selecting a chairman—even though the members are not very well acquainted or have not previously worked together. (It is suggested that selecting a chairman be delayed until the end of Stage III.) Under the scheme to be discussed shortly, there is no particular need for a chairman at the first meetings. Such choice can be made more effectively after there has been enough social interaction to allow selection based on skills and knowledge rather than on first impressions.

⁵For research and guidelines about these two stages, see George M. Beal (ed.), *Committee Formation and Maintenance*; and Ronald C. Powers, "The Committee Concept: Considerations of the Information Stage" and "The Extension Committee: Facilitators or . . . ?" papers presented at Manitoba In-Service Training, Manitoba, Canada, August, 1961.

STAGE III is the *examination of the situation*—in which presentation of background information begins. To illustrate this and subsequent stages, assume we are dealing with such committees as community and public affairs, program steering, rural area development, or over-all program planning. The first step in Stage II

STAGE I: COMMITTEE SELECTION

1. Identify the key influentials in each community.
2. Determine size of committee—usually enough to insure attendance of 12 to 15 each time.
3. Select from influentials to obtain representativeness of communities, occupations, institutions, etc.
4. Obtain approval from governing or advisory board if there is one.

STAGE II: COMMITTEE ORIENTATION

1. Present and discuss committee purposes, means of operation, and extent of responsibility.
2. Delay selection of officers until end of Stage III.
3. Discuss proposed means and content for Stage III.
4. Establish schedule for Stage III.

STAGE III: EXAMINATION OF SITUATION

1. Series of seminar-type sessions on community change, economic growth, imbalances in situation, and process of social action for change.
2. Sources of data including census reports, agency reports, popularized research reports, and current studies of the area.

CW.
STAGE IV: IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEMS (NEEDS)

1. Situation is continually examined and comparisons made between *what is* and *what ought (could or should) be*. The gaps represent problems or needs.
2. More specific data are added to those presented in Stage III.
3. *What ought to be* is determined from research and value judgements of the committee and Extension staff.
4. Some problems may be subjected to further study.
5. Sources of data are the same as in previous stage.

STAGE V: DETERMINATION OF FAILURE ELEMENTS

1. Indicate the likely *human or structural imbalances* causing the problem.
2. Sort problems into those that could be addressed by Extension and those which need to be approached through social action of other groups and agencies.
3. Add data from social science research. In some cases additional study will be necessary.

STAGE VI: SELECTION OF PRIORITIES

1. Problems to be addressed by Extension are ordered by priority.
2. Sources of data include review of current programs, available resources, and state or area priorities.

NOTE: The amount of data, increased over time, is brought to bear when needs are identified and moves from general to specific.

Figure 3. Flow Model: background information and the flow of the planning process.

the presentation of a framework or model to help the group understand the social and economic system it is planning for. This could be a series of meetings to examine social and economic changes (their causes and expected future trends) and to analyze local (community, county, or area) trends and the relationship of the local to the national situation. The main concern is to develop an understanding of such things as the relationships between increasing farm size and decline of small towns, technology and farm size, population migration and institutional change, and income needs and population out-migration. This kind of understanding helps eliminate the identification of symptoms instead of basic problems at later stages.

Much of the data necessary for this stage can be gathered from secondary sources (such as the Census) and reports of state and local departments of government. Emphasis is on the analysis and interpretation of the data rather than on the data themselves (understanding relationships involved): The fact that the population of County A decreased 25 per cent in the last decade should be interpreted in terms of what this means to schools, churches, voluntary organizations, per capita income, etc.

We cannot assume that the committee members already know the basic ABC's of social and economic growth and development (the process of increasing human satisfaction through a better use of resources): Stage III is devoted to this task.

Traditionalists—friends and foes of program planning alike—will say this is idealistic daydreaming, that lay people will not take time to do this. The *right* people *will* and *are* taking time in at least one test case. Specialists and county staff in eight contiguous counties in Iowa identified 15 to 20 influentials in each county, using a procedure adapted from community power studies.⁶ These people in each county were brought together for an orientation meeting (Stage II). They were told why they had been selected, how they had been selected, and the purpose of the committee (to study, analyze, establish priorities, and make recommendations to the governing body of the county Extension Service as to the educational efforts which should be addressed by Extension in the future). They were told that they did not possess adequate information or understanding to do this job at present. It was proposed that all committee members attend a seminar series of six two-hour sessions (con-

⁶For an elaboration of the identification procedure see Ronald C. Powers, *Identifying the Community Power Structure*, North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 19 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, October, 1965).

stituting Stage III). The vote was unanimous in every county to accept the proposal—the participants wanted to start immediately and meet about every two weeks, right through the summer.

Background data were selected to illustrate the relationships within and between the imbalances suggested in Figures 1 and 2. The concept of imbalance constituted the subject of one of the seminar sessions. Since the series (called Seminar Six) is entering the final phase at this writing, it cannot be determined whether this will necessarily lead to more effective decision making regarding Extension educational efforts. Attendance and feedback from some participants and personal evaluations by specialists and county staff involved give rise to optimism.

STAGE IV begins a narrowing and focusing on the local situation. This adds to the "what the situation is" data presented at Stage III and introduces additional data to show "what ought to be." The major effort at Stage IV is to determine the number and extent of problem gaps. These could be infinite in number but, given the committee's area of concern (youth, family living, or public affairs) and the imbalance framework, the range of problems can be delimited somewhat.

The *what is* data come from census reports, previous research, and, where necessary, from new surveys of various types. In order to avoid instigating a wave of surveys it is important to generalize from one local survey to another where possible. Furthermore, it is feasible to use various "quickie"⁸ surveys for some purposes.

What ought to be can be determined from research findings, primary sources of data such as surveys, and the value judgments of the committee and Extension workers. It should be obvious that some gaps can be readily identified within a short period of time, whereas others will become long-term tasks.⁹ This is one good reason the planning function should be continuous rather than periodic. Data may be readily available to show both the *what is* and *what ought to be* as far as fertilizer use, farm size, or family num-

⁷ Two publications prepared for use by the committee members, county staff, and other local people were developed. See Eber Eldridge, *The Economic Base of Seven Southern Iowa Counties*, RAD-52 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, September, 1965); and Ronald C. Powers, *Population Analysis of Eight Southern Iowa Counties*, RAD-54 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, September, 1965).

⁸ If a planning committee wants to get a "feel" of what other people think about an issue it can use a one or two page survey and each ask five people to fill it out. Even though the usual rules of sampling may not be observed, the committee will have gotten a kind of "straw" vote.

⁹ See J. Paul Leagans, "A Concept of Needs," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Summer, 1964), 89-96, for an expanded discussion of the gap (or need) between what is and what ought to be and the use of this idea in planning.

man is concerned; it may not be available to show *what is* and/or *what ought to be* in the case of school size and curriculum, health facilities, taxation, and the like. Lacking sufficient information, the committee may erroneously conclude that no educational priority can be established, but the judgments of its members and Extension personnel may be used to establish a "data search" priority.

STAGE V is necessary to "sort" the gaps identified in the previous stage. Knowledge of why gaps exist permits classifying them into (1) those which can be approached educationally by Extension and (2) those which must be solved through the actions or efforts of other organizations and agencies. Since Extension educational efforts are often an appropriate phase of social action projects, many of the gaps can be categorized in both places. Stage V presents another opportunity to communicate to committee members the scope and depth of contributions that can be made by Extension. Some of them will not be completely familiar with the philosophy and policy of Extension, much less its jargon (if the selection procedure noted above is used).

Furthermore, Stage V "sets up" the task of Stage VI by eliminating from priority consideration those problems inappropriate to Extension, although there may not be many. If lack of county zoning was a gap that existed because people needed information, it would be appropriate to consider this as a priority for Extension's effort. If zoning has not occurred due to lack of appropriate state legislation, it could not appropriately be considered for Extension educational effort. If zoning does not exist due to both reasons, it could be considered because education could be one strategy to changing existing legislation.

STAGE VI utilizes conclusions from background information which has been collected, analyzed, and interpreted to set priorities or to recommend which gaps should be addressed educationally. This step is necessary because Extension's educational resources are limited. Local people can play a major role at this point. Their appropriate role is to help decide which gaps or problems should be addressed first. Although they can be very helpful, it is not their major role to have identified the problems; this is the professional workers' responsibility. Nor is it the responsibility of lay people to determine how to do the educational job, though again their reactions can be valuable. The traditional formula of telling local people that their job is to "analyze the situation, identify the problems, and set the objectives" places too much responsibility on local people and contradicts the role expectations local people have regarding professionals or educational experts.

CONCLUSIONS

The proposal outlined here suggests the following: Background information should be organized similar to research reports (i.e., a combination of narrative explanation and selected data to illustrate the points). Masses of statistics should not be the focus; principles or relationships are more important. In order to demonstrate principles of the multiplication process we do not need an entire multiplication table; we only need a few figures. In similar fashion, background information in Extension program planning should first concentrate on demonstrating the manner in which the various factors are related. Additional statistics can be added as specific questions are raised.

Relative to conventional (or typical) planning, the procedures outlined generate several suggestions: (1) a careful selection of people who are more planning than action oriented (decision makers); (2) a more complete than usual orientation of the people; (3) the elimination of deadlines for committee statements (or starting 6 to 12 months prior to expected results); (4) an approach to planning as a more continuous function; (5) a training method devised for new committee members since there will always be an attrition of members—and more than just 15 minutes, or even one meeting; and (6) more centralization as far as the collection and analysis of data are concerned.

One means of accomplishing such a task is to organize data analysis by social and economic geographic areas and have appropriate state specialists develop the analysis, suggest presentation procedures, and conduct necessary training for county or area staff. There is need for all Extension personnel to become familiar with the role and flow of background information in the planning process.

Finally, time spent in Stage III is complementary to effective involvement in program planning. Not only does it provide means for their gaining an understanding of the situation they are to make decisions about, it provides an opportunity for social interaction—a prerequisite to group formation.

Several potential advantages of this over conventional planning procedures were noted—among the more important: (1) significant problems rather than symptoms will be identified; (2) priority setting will be more effective; (3) group formation will be enhanced; (4) data collection and analysis procedures can be more effective and efficient; (5) participants will be more satisfied; and (6) important educational efforts are pre-legitimized.