A Three-Phase Model of Needs Assessment

A library system in a large city investigates the information needs of the community, both its patrons and potential library users.

A federal task force collects data to examine the health care and health-related needs of the American population.

A school district seeks community consensus on educational goals in order to set directions for future planning.

A city of 125,000 engages its citizens in a visioning process that results in a "future focus" designed to lead to a community action plan. The future focus is used as a guide to determine needs and programs in education, health and social services, transportation, and land use.

A statewide university system conducts a needs assessment to determine how best to meet community goals and allocate resources in the coming decade.

These examples are only a few of the many types of needs assessments (NAs) that are conducted for a variety of purposes. This chapter provides a general background on what NAs are and why they are conducted and presents a three-phase plan or framework as a general guide.
Some Background on Needs Assessment

What Is a Needs Assessment? In our perspective, NA may be defined broadly as

a systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources. The priorities are based on identified needs.

A need is generally considered to be a discrepancy or gap between "what is," or the present state of affairs in regard to the group and situation of interest, and "what should be," or a desired state of affairs. Kaufman (1988, 1992) emphasizes that need is the discrepancy between current and desired results or consequences. The concept of need is discussed in more detail in a later section. A needs assessment, then, seeks to determine such discrepancies, examine their nature and causes, and set priorities for future action.

Who Conducts NAs? Many types of organizations or agencies do: governmental agencies, school systems, social service agencies, business corporations, cities, hospitals, universities. NAs also grow out of citizen action groups that want to participate more directly in making decisions about their community: control of growth, improving the infrastructure (roads, utilities), or obtaining better recreational facilities.

Why Conduct NAs? The question arises, "Don't we already know what we need?" The answer is, yes and no. There is plenty of information from the press, the broadcast media, and reports of special commissions on social and economic indicators of need. Examples abound regarding low achievement in schools, drug abuse, incidence of major health problems, violence, homelessness, and family breakdowns, among others. These areas are not wanting for proposals to meet the needs, such as the war on drugs or illiteracy or homelessness. So the question remains, "Why conduct an NA?"

One clear reason is that populations that seem quite similar demographically often perceive their needs as being very different from each other. As an illustration, a large metropolitan region of more than 2 million set up a countywide council for long-range planning on growth. Recently, eight of the involved suburban and unincorporated communities requested permission to elect their own local councils, in addition to or instead of the county council. They believed that their needs were unique to their own geography and demography.

An NA is conducted to derive information and perceptions of values as a guide to making policy and program decisions that will benefit specific groups of people. Although NAs are often undertaken for other purposes (research studies of the NA process itself, identifying needs of special groups such as handicapped children and people with Alzheimer's disease, or justifying decisions already made—a practice we do not recommend), the focus of this book is on assessments done in a specific organization or community that are intended to lead to action, change, and improvement. NAs are shaped by and take their characteristics from their specific contexts. The NAs cited at the beginning of this chapter were all conducted for policy or program purposes in behalf of specific groups.

The word group is important. The doctor or teacher assesses needs daily in dealing directly with patients or students. But an NA is not intended to provide diagnostic information about individuals. Its purpose is to make decisions regarding priorities for program or system improvement. This can be accomplished sometimes by aggregating data that have been gathered for individuals, but it can also occur by asking questions of and about people served by the system that are never asked by the health professional or teacher. NA, in the broadest sense, is concerned with policy and programs, not individual diagnosis. If the NA is done well, however, it should lead to measures that will directly benefit the individuals with the needs.

We make no sweeping claims for NA. Rather, our proposal is modest: that NA offers a useful and rational approach to identifying and describing specific areas of need, discovering factors contributing to perpetuation of needs, and devising criteria for plans to meet or ameliorate the need.

How Is an NA Done? We propose a plan consisting of three phases—preassessment, assessment, and postassessment. These are briefly explained in this chapter and are further delineated in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In Chapters 5 through 10 (Part II), we describe many procedures for data gathering, analysis, and interpretation and discuss their applicability to the three phases.
Who Benefits From an NA? We believe that the primary beneficiaries are the people whom the organization or agency serves: patients, customers, students, citizens served by government agencies, and other groups in both the public and private sector. From this perspective, we suggest that there are both valid and nonvalid NAs.

Some purposes of a valid NA would be (a) laying the groundwork for designing a new or improved program of service or education, (b) restructurizing an organization in light of better understanding of its goals, (c) setting criteria for hiring training personnel, or (d) determining possible solutions to a complex problem.

A nonvalid NA purpose would be to benefit only the organization itself. An NA may have the hidden agenda of improving public relations or promoting a course of action that has already been decided on. In past years, pertinent literature included the idea that a good reason for an NA was to have the community approve of or validate a program or action. In our view, that is not a legitimate reason for an NA.

How Does NA Relate to the Allocation of Resources? Resource allocation is an important part of organizational or community planning. In the best of all possible worlds, a school or university system, social service agency, or corporation would have all the money they desire to accomplish their goals. Furthermore, all people involved would be working at their highest level of ability and striving to fulfill their potential.

In the real world, there is never enough money to meet all needs, nor do programs and people function perfectly. A major function of policymakers and management is to decide where to put the organization's resources—what programs or services to add, what to maintain, what to cut back or delete. Some things work well, but a lot of others do not. To a large extent, NA grows out of a dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs, whatever that is, and the desire to make improvements. It may also serve the function of analyzing which elements of present programs are working well but need additional support for maintenance or what new services or programs should be added.

For social service agencies, one purpose of NA is to develop a basis for outreach to people who might benefit from the services but who are not now being served. Agencies require data on both unexpressed (or latent) need for services and expressed demand to allocate their resources to programs and groups with the greatest needs.

What Is the Unique Focus of NA? NA focuses on the ends to be attained, rather than the means, although the data can form the basis for guidelines and criteria for selecting the means or solutions. It also provides a broad base among stakeholders for decision making. One of the reasons for the rise and popularization of NA in the late 1960s and 1970s was that school systems and public agencies saw it as a way of involving the school community in setting goals and priorities, whereas previously, decisions were all too often made unilaterally by governing boards or councils or by individual administrators. NA cannot always prevent decisions made for personal or political reasons, but it does provide a mechanism whereby broader-based decisions are more likely to occur.

Point of View of the Book

This guide presents a three-phase model that combines a logical structure with flexibility and choices to fit the circumstances. It assumes that NA occurs best within an ongoing or cyclical process of strategic planning, program implementation, and evaluation, both formative and summative. We believe that NA offers a useful and rational approach to identifying and describing specific areas of need, discovering factors contributing to its perpetuation, and devising criteria for plans to meet or ameliorate the need.

The book also uses concepts from many disciplines, including organizational communication theory and communication strategies applied to group sensing and deliberation. It furnishes examples of actual NAs from human resources agencies, education, industry, health, city planning, recreation, and social services. Our model also builds in an evaluation of the NA process and methods for enhancing the likelihood of success and the use of the recommendations.

When organizations initiate an NA, they typically take a top-down approach. They define their goals and reasons for the NA, decide what information they should have, and plan and manage the NA. When community groups initiate NA, they take a bottom-up approach. In the latter case, the community may already feel that it knows its needs,
and the assessment is often based not so much on getting information about previously unrecognized needs as on seeking widespread community input to refine an understanding of the needs, suggest alternate solutions to known needs, or support certain courses of action.

This book focuses mainly on NAs managed by organizations. Although we recognize the importance of grassroots efforts in NA, the book is intended mainly as a guide for people (usually within an organization) who have the responsibility for designing NAs as an integral part of short- and long-range planning or in concert with program evaluation. Nevertheless, we recognize and emphasize the importance of widespread stakeholder participation in the entire process. We have included many examples that show such participation.

STRENGTHS OF THIS BOOK

A study of several hundred NAs conducted in the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s showed that many had serious shortcomings (Witkin, 1994). Chief among these were the following:

- Confusing means with ends or needs with wishes
- Using only one method for gathering information
- Equating the opinion survey with an NA
- Confusing levels of need (see the following section)
- Failing to use the data to set priorities

This book addresses all of these problems. It seeks to strike a balance between the “right” way(s) to conduct an NA and what is doable and feasible in the context of agencies and institutions and their constraints. We believe that following the three-phase plan results in information that is valid and that will lead to constructive action.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For both newcomers and experienced needs assessors, we recommend reading all of Part I (Chapters 1 through 4) carefully to become familiar with the general model and the three phases of NA. Refer to Chapters 5 through 10 in Part II as the different processes are suggested in Part I.

A Three-Phase Model of Needs Assessment

NEEDS—CORE CONCEPTS

DEFINITIONS OF NEED

The most difficult concept to grasp is the whole idea of “need,” in the sense that it has become widely accepted for NA (following Kaufman’s work; see Kaufman, 1988). Part of the reason may be due to ambiguity in the language. In NA, the noun and the verb have quite different meanings.

Need as a noun refers to the gap or discrepancy between a present state (what is) and a desired end state, future state, or condition (what should be). The need is neither the present nor the future state; it is the gap between them. Therefore, a need is not a thing in itself but, rather, an inference drawn from examining a present state and comparing it with a vision of a future (better) state or condition. In a sense, a need is like a problem or concern.

Need as a verb points to what is required or desired to fill the discrepancy—solutions, means to an end. There is an important difference between needs and solutions. If you find yourself saying, “I (we, they) need child care, hot lunches, a phonics program, money to hire recreation directors in our parks program, stiffer penalties for drunk driving,” you can be sure you are discussing solutions, not needs. The child care or hot lunches or stiffer penalties are means to achieve some desired end—in effect, they are solutions to the underlying problem or concern.

The major drawback to many NAs is that the two meanings of need are often confused. It will become clearer how to avoid the confusion when we explain the three levels of need.

Unmet Needs. NAs are predicated on the assumption that groups of people have needs that are not being met or not being addressed adequately. When they are aware of such needs, the awareness is often expressed as demands. When they are not aware, the needs are said to be unexpressed or latent. NAs seek to uncover unmet needs, both recognized and latent.

DEFINITION OF NA

At the beginning of this chapter, we proposed a definition of NA in terms of its general purposes. It can also be viewed as a series of
procedures for identifying and describing both present and desired states in a specific context, deriving statements of need, and placing the needs in order of priority for later action.

Some writers make a distinction between need identification, needs analysis, and needs assessment. In our approach, identification and analysis of needs are parts of the total process of NA.

Earlier, we stated that an NA was a systematic procedure for setting priorities and making decisions about programs and allocation of resources. Let us look at the components of the definition.

An NA is a *systematic* approach that progresses through a defined series of phases. It gathers data by means of established procedures and methods designed for specific purposes. The kinds and scope of methods are selected to fit the purposes and context of the NA. NA *sets priorities and determines criteria for solutions* so that planners and managers can make defensible decisions. NA leads to *action* that will *improve* programs, services, organizational structure and operations, or a combination of these elements. NA *sets criteria* for determining how best to allocate available money, people, facilities, and other resources.

**TARGET GROUPS AND LEVELS OF NEED**

We have said that NA should be focused on the people in the system, but that statement can be confusing. One way of clarifying the idea is to think in terms of three *levels of need*, each of which also represents a target group for the NA. Figure 1.1 shows two schemas for relationships of the three need levels to a system of interest and to external influences.

Here are examples of components at the three levels:

**Level 1 (primary)—service receivers**: students, clients, patients, information users, commuters, potential customers

**Level 2 (secondary)—service providers and policymakers**: teachers, parents, social workers, caretakers, health care professionals, plant workers, postal employees, librarians, administrators, supervisors, managers

**Level 3 (tertiary)—resources or solutions**: buildings, facilities, equipment, supplies, technology, programs, class size, surgical procedures, information retrieval systems, transportation, salaries and benefits, program delivery systems, time allocations, working conditions

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*Figure 1.1. Two Schemas Showing Relationships of Three Levels of Target Groups to the System and to External Influences*

The people in Level 1 are those for whom the system ultimately exists; they are at the heart of the NA process. Those in Level 2 either have some direct relationship to those in Level 1, providing information, services, training, or nurture, or they perform planning, technical assistance, or oversight functions that affect others in Level 2 as well as, indirectly, those in Level 1. People in Level 2, however, may also have unmet needs related to the functions they perform in relation either to their colleagues (such as managers) or to groups in Level 1.

Therefore, although the prime target for NA—the ones who will ultimately benefit—should be Level 1, NAs can also be performed at Level 2—principally for training needs—or at Level 3, when the needs of the organization as an *organization* or the resources it provides are the focus of the assessment. These distinctions will become clearer in subsequent chapters, through descriptions of NAs at different levels and for different purposes.

Figure 1.1 also shows the three levels in two different system contexts and with different relationships to persons in Level 1. Schema A depicts an organization such as a university or the clients (members) of a health maintenance organization in which the service receivers, the primary focus of the NA, are within the system on a regular basis. Services and resources are focused on the students or clients. The
people in Level 1 constitute a known, or “closed,” group. In Schema B, the service receivers are outside the system. Examples are potential clients of social service agencies within a catchment area or potential customers of a business. The exact numbers and characteristics of such persons are to a large extent unknown, and they therefore constitute a “fuzzy” group. (Market research in business is an example of an attempt to discover the characteristics and wishes of fuzzy groups.)

In both schemas, the system (agency, organization) is subject to various external influences: societal goals and values, economic and social forces, funding sources, family, religious organizations, the physical environment, political factors, legislative mandates, and other opportunities and constraints. The needs assessor takes such influences into account when planning and monitoring the NA.

We reiterate that, ideally, a valid NA is focused first of all on Level 1. It seeks to determine the needs of the people for whom the organization or system exists. The brief descriptions at the beginning of this chapter are of Level 1 NAs. Other examples of Level 1 NAs are those conducted to (a) assess the career planning needs of psychology majors at a large university, (b) identify personal and schooling needs of learning disabled children, and (c) analyze the physical and mental health needs of persons over age 55 who are enrolled in a health maintenance organization.

Many NAs, however, are conducted at Level 2. Examples are to determine preservice training needs of counselors, determine in-service needs of elementary teachers where a new math program is being instituted, and determine training needs of electrical workers in a manufacturing plant that is adopting new processes. Organizations in which the service receivers are outside the system often conduct Level 2 NAs in areas such as the physical and mental health needs or training needs of their staff—the service providers. Level 2 NAs may also be conducted to serve the information needs of an emerging field of technology, to perform a task analysis in a changing field, or for policy reasons in a specific context.

Level 3 needs often masquerade as Level 1. That is, educators may assert that a school system “needs” more school buses, a different reading program, a longer school day, or computers in every classroom. But those are really solutions to Level 1 needs. Many Level 3 NAs in public agencies focus on the “need” for different types of transportation or maintenance of buildings. There are legitimate reasons for conducting such assessments. Our point of view, however, is that NAs at the second and third levels should grow out of adequate Level 1 assessments, or at least be consciously based on an understanding of Level 1 needs from prior investigation.

The ideal NA, then, begins at Level 1 and is related to societal and organizational goals. Beginning at Level 1 is particularly important if the agency or organization has not previously conducted an NA. If previous NAs have been conducted, however, cyclical updating or other requirements may make it advisable to start at Level 2 or 3. For example, a large health maintenance organization undertakes yearly assessments of its buildings’ and facilities’ needs for repairs, maintenance, new facilities, and the like, but these Level 3 NAs are implicitly related to needs at Levels 1 and 2 (see Chapter 3 for details).

The previous history of NAs or evaluations of programs and services in the system is relevant to present NAs and their focus. If prior data collection has occurred, the needs assessment should take advantage of it. The important factor is that the needs assessor and needs assessment committee (NAC; see Chapter 2) should be fully aware of what is being assessed, why, and at what level. Assessments of training or facilities needs are by no means complete NAs, and care must be taken that solutions or programs are not confused with the ultimate needs (Level 1) that they are intended to meet.

THE IDEA OF A SYSTEM

A system is a regularly interacting or interdependent group of people forming a unified whole and organized for a common purpose. In this text, we use system to refer to the organization or group involved with the NA.

An important characteristic of a system is that all parts are interdependent. Anything that affects one part of the system has consequences for the whole. We advocate an approach to NA that identifies processes and functions that cross organizational lines, with the goal of increasing chances for success and reducing chances for failure. Our approach also recognizes that systems such as schools and social agencies exist within the broader context of the community and that they must take that context into account in NA.

Typical systems that conduct NAs are educational (K-12 schools, universities, private training institutions), health related (hospitals, health agencies), social services (departments of health and welfare, counseling agencies, relief organizations), trade and commerce (man-
manufacturers, retail businesses), and public service and government (municipalities, park and recreation districts, state governments and agencies).

The boundaries and scope of the system whose needs are being assessed are determined by definition. An NA could be conducted of a state library system, a regional or county library system, the libraries in one city, or a specific program in a library, such as school outreach or on-line services for the public via computers.

Finally, problems of systems are also often messy, ambiguous, ongoing, and rarely completely solved. They stem from multiple and interacting causes. Needs assessors must be cognizant of this complexity as they carry out their work.

## A Three-Phase Plan for Assessing Needs

Figure 1.2 displays a general plan for assessing needs in three phases. They occur in sequence, and each phase concludes with a written product. The boundaries between them are not fixed; however, they merely suggest a time progression of a given set of tasks.

Phase 1, *preassessment* (described in Chapter 2), is exploratory. Its function is to determine what is already known about needs in the system; to identify issues and major areas of concern; and to decide on system boundaries, focus and purpose of the NA, potential sources of data, how the information will be used, and what kinds of decisions will be made on the basis of the findings. In Phase 1, the needs assessor also develops the design and management plan for Phase 2 and sets criteria for evaluating the whole needs assessment.

In Phase 2, the *main assessment* (data gathering) occurs. The needs assessor and NAC gather and analyze information and opinions on the needs, set preliminary priorities, and analyze causes related to all three system levels (see Chapter 3).

Phase 3, *postassessment*, is the bridge to use of the data and plans for action. The principal tasks are to set priorities and criteria for solutions, weigh alternative solutions, and formulate action plans for program changes or other interventions. Information on the NA design, results, and recommendations for action are communicated to decision makers and other stakeholders, and relevant information is prepared for archives and other uses (see Chapter 4). The evaluation of the NA itself also occurs in Phase 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE 1</th>
<th>Preassessment (exploration)</th>
<th>Set up management plan for NA</th>
<th>Identify major need areas and, or issues</th>
<th>Identify existing information regarding need areas</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Data to collect</td>
<td><em>Sources</em></td>
<td><em>Methods</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PHASE 2</td>
<td>Assessment (data gathering)</td>
<td>Determine general purpose of the NA</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gather data on needs</td>
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<td>Set preliminary priorities on needs, Level 1</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Perform causal analyses at Levels 1, 2, and 3</td>
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<td>Analyze and synthesize all data</td>
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<td>PHASE 3</td>
<td>Postassessment (utilization)</td>
<td>Set priorities on needs at all applicable levels</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Consider alternative solutions</td>
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<td>Develop action plan to implement solutions</td>
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<td>Evaluate the NA</td>
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<td>Communicate results</td>
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| Outcomes: Preliminary plan for Phases 2 and 3, and plan for evaluation of the NA | Outcome: Action plans, written and oral briefings, and reports |

*Figure 1.2: Three-Phase Plan for Needs Assessment*
Contexts of Needs Assessments

To a certain extent, NA takes its character and methods from the context in which it is done. In an organizational context, NA ideally occurs as an integral part of a cycle that consists of planning, program installation and implementation, and evaluation. Viewed in its simplest form, there is a circular relationship in which evaluation of the adequacy and effects of programs that were installed to meet certain needs leads logically to a new phase of NA and planning. In practice, this circular relationship is more complex and interrelated than it first seems. NA may occur in any phase of the cycle (see Figure 3.3 in Chapter 3).

We have identified five context-embedded perspectives of organizations that influence NAs and the collection of needs-related data. They are planning, evaluative, cyclical, ongoing for a management information system (MIS), and collaborative. The five perspectives are described in detail in Chapter 3.

Planning and Conducting the NA

An NA, like other purposeful and systematic activities, is planned, monitored, and evaluated (see Chapter 2). Planning includes deciding on the objectives, focus, and scope of the assessment; obtaining commitment to the effort and the use of its results; appointing a NAC; and designing and implementing NA procedures. Planning can also include a causal analysis of the NA itself, to predict potential problems and to redesign the plan if necessary.

Monitoring consists of periodic checks to see that the NA is proceeding in a timely fashion along the lines desired, particularly in Phase 2 (assessment); making necessary adjustments in time lines or data-gathering procedures; and ensuring that all requisite communication and action linkages inside and outside the system are kept operative. Monitoring alerts the needs assessor to the need for corrective action before a problem escalates.

We have found that monitoring can be enhanced by posting on a wall a large flowchart (or success map—see Chapter 10) of the planned activities, with indications of target dates and persons responsible for various activities. Both professional and support staff involved in the NA can use the chart to see how their work fits into the whole picture and to give feedback to the needs assessor on contingencies that may arise.

Evaluation is designed with criteria such that when the NA is complete, the NAC and the policymakers have a clear picture of the extent to which the NA met its stated goals—and if some of the goals were not met, the reasons why. Certain methods of causal analysis described in Chapter 10 can be used to predict potential problems in completing the NA as planned and to suggest areas to redesign.

KEY FACTORS IN CONDUCTING NAs

Before discussing the three phases in detail, we call attention to some factors that are basic to a successful NA:

- Keep in mind the value and necessity of broad-based participation by stakeholders.
- Choose appropriate means of gathering information about critical issues and other data.
- Recognize core values in the group whose needs are being assessed.
- NA is a participatory process; it is not something that is “done to” people.
- NA cannot ignore political factors. Some people may view the process as causing a loss of control. The priorities derived may be counter to entrenched ideas in the system.
- Data-gathering methods by themselves are not an NA. The NA is a total decision-making process, in which the data are but one component.

Every NA situation is different. There is no one “right” way that applies to every NA, although there are a few general principles to guide the needs assessor. Chapter 2 suggests some ways to start from where you are, then branch out, depending on the previous history of the system and other relevant factors.

A CAUTION BEFORE BEGINNING

The notion that there is or should be a systematic and rational way to obtain information and set priorities is an ideal that may be difficult to achieve in practice. People who have closely observed how skillful decision makers behave and the conditions under which they work suggest that “actual decision makers face:
1. ambiguous and poorly defined problems;
2. incomplete information about alternatives;
3. incomplete information about the baseline, the background of the problem;
4. incomplete information about the consequences of supposed alternatives;
5. incomplete information about the range and content of values, preferences, and interests; and
6. limited time, limited skills, and limited resources.” (Forster, 1989, p. 50)

Forster (1989) points out that there is a continuum of decision making running from the idealized situation of the rationalist to highly politically structured and distorted situations. One task for the needs assessor is to determine where along this continuum the organization lies. To a large extent, the structure of the situation will determine what is practical as well as rational to do in it. The framework we propose provides tools for improving the definition of problems and information about their causes and possible consequences. It also suggests alternative paths and procedures to adapt to the situation, without sacrificing clarity of purpose.

SUMMARY

The major purpose of NA is to gather information for setting priorities on needs of people in relation to a system of interest. Data from the NA are used to set criteria for allocating resources and for developing new or improved programs or services to meet the needs.

This guide presents a three-phase plan for conducting an NA. We advocate viewing NA and target groups from three levels, to clarify distinctions between needs of primary recipients of services or programs (Level 1) and the people and resources that exist because of them (Levels 2 and 3). The activities of the NA are carried out with the help of a management design for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the project.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of Part I explain the three phases: preassessment, assessment, and postassessment. In Part II, Chapters 5 through 9 describe methods appropriate to gathering data for assessing needs, and Chapter 10 describes three methods for causal analysis.

A Three-Phase Model of Needs Assessment

Notes

1. Many NAs at Level 3 do focus on solutions or demands for programs, products, or services. Unless they are consciously based on data regarding Level 1 needs of the target population, we regard them as essentially market research. The question is, What is really the nature of the need that the program or service is expected to fulfill or solve?
2. An in-depth discussion of needs definitions can be found in Witkin (1991).
3. For elaboration of this point of view, see Kaufman’s Organizational Elements Model (Kaufman, Rojas, & Mayer, 1993). Kaufman also discusses levels of need, but in a different conceptual framework.