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Assessing perceptions of 'basic minimum needs': a modified Venn diagram technique

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• Introduction to a BMN approach

The concept of Basic Minimum Needs (BMN) emerged in the late 1970s as an alternative approach to development. It aims to enhance the targeting of primary health care programmes which previously had limited success in reaching rural communities. BMN is a socially-oriented and community-based development approach to fulfilling basic human and community needs. Ideally, it represents a shift away from a sectoral view of development, towards a more holistic process. It strives for equity through democratic participation.

The objectives of the BMN approach include:

- improving the quality of life through enabling local people and communities to meet their own basic minimum needs;
- strengthening intersectoral collaboration among government sectors and encouraging partnerships between people, government sectors and NGOs; and,
- ensuring community participation and self-reliance in development.

Broad categories of BMN indicators have been developed. But as 'needs' are context specific, there are no universal standards by which BMN can be assessed. Each village's BMN must be assessed individually to ensure that appropriate problems, needs and opportunities are identified.

Yet there is a significant methodological weakness in the BMN process of involving communities in identifying their priority needs. Conventional surveys, in one form or another, have been the main tool used to

conduct BMN assessments. These form the basis of project planning and implementation.

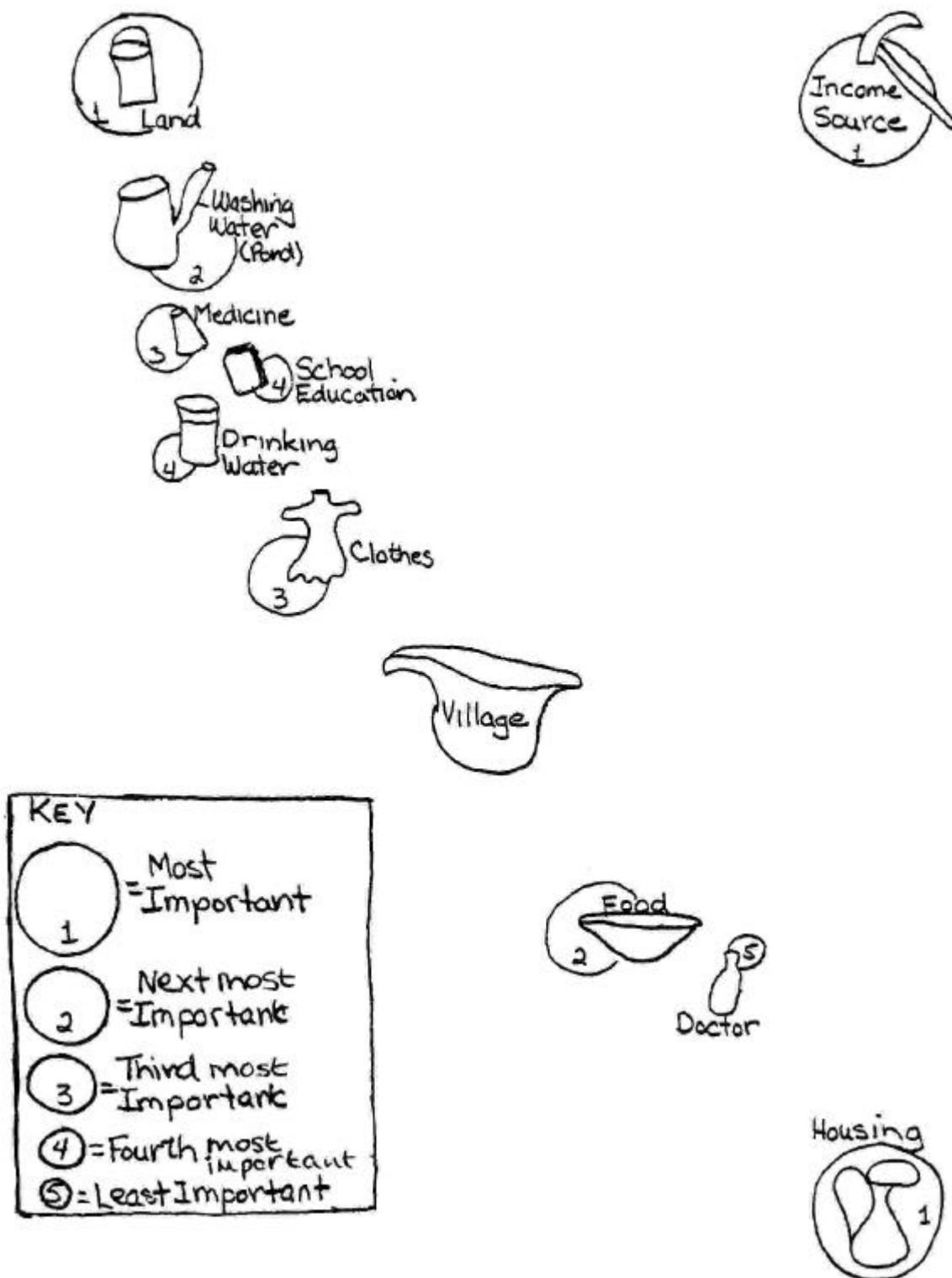
Approaches are needed that can be used by local communities to assess BMN. These should be simple to understand and appropriate to the local level of education and skills. Once delineated, they should provide a methodology for communities to assess their own problems, determine priorities, plan action and monitor and evaluate actions taken. We believe that a modified Venn diagram (used with a range of other PRA techniques), is an effective means for communities to assess their own BMN.

• The BMN venn diagram

Our modified Venn diagram is referred to as the *BMN Venn Diagram*. It enables villagers to identify perceived basic minimum needs, assess their relative fulfilment at village level and evaluate their relative importance (this is the first stage in priority setting).

In this approach, villagers are asked what they need for a good quality life. Symbols are collected (or drawn) by the participants to represent each identified need. An additional symbol is chosen to represent the village.

Figure 1. Basic minimum needs Venn diagram, Dajjehona village, Bangladesh



Note that a symbol close to the village means that the need for that item is being met.

(Participants included: Abu Kalam, Nur Lamem, Geb Anu, Aziz, Hussein, Deda, Slalom, Muajjem. Facilitator: Carin Duchscherer. Translator: Muajjem Hessain, April 1995)

Next, participants are requested to place the symbols in relation to the village. Each need's symbol is placed on the village symbol if the need is being met, far away from the village symbol if the need is not being met and a relative distance between these two perceived extremes if the need is partially met.

After completing this task, villagers are requested to rank each need according to its importance using conventional Venn diagram discs. A limited number of each sized disc (see below) is used to begin the process of priority ranking. After completing the diagram, more discussion is held to understand community perceptions and ideas in more detail.

The purpose and content of the BMN Venn Diagram is very easy for villagers to understand. Participants become quite spirited when arranging the symbols on the ground. An example of a BMN Venn Diagram is shown in Figure 1. In this case, land, housing and income are the most important needs, none of which are currently being met.

In our first attempts at using the BMN Venn Diagram, the participants had an unlimited supply of each sized disc. However, the largest disc (representing primary importance) was used most frequently and rarely were the smaller discs used at all. This had both advantages and drawbacks. An advantage was that, as outsiders, we were informed of the many community needs which were considered important. A drawback was that it was more difficult to undertake a priority ranking, especially when time is pressing. Thus, we later found it effective to limit the discs to 2, 3 or 4 of each size depending on the number of needs articulated. In this way priority ranking was expressed in the first diagram.

A clear initial question is crucial to the success of the BMN Venn Diagram. This is especially important when working with children as key informants. For example, there is a big difference between asking community members 'what is necessary for a satisfactory life?' or 'what do you need for a happy life?' compared with 'what do you need?'. The former questions bring forth broad categories of basic needs, the latter a 'wish list' which the

development agency may have trouble granting!

Groups do not necessarily base their prioritisation of needs on fundamental necessities (i.e. food, water etc.). Instead, they may articulate priorities felt at a village level. In Hathazari village, Bangladesh, people felt that their housing needs were not being met at all. This information seemed strange given that appropriate houses could be seen in the village. During the discussion, it was learned that the people were landless. They did not even own the land on which their houses were built. They felt they could be displaced at any time by the landlord. Thus, the criteria used for their housing need were strongly linked with security issues.

• Similarities and differences

The attitudes and perceptions of different people vary. The BMN Venn Diagram shows how stated needs, and the criteria used to determine relative fulfilment of those needs, may differ between different groups. Variations may be due to gender differences or geographical, social, cultural, environmental and economic factors which impact on a community's livelihood.

For example, in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, Northern India, most villages are isolated and cut-off by snow for several months of the year. In these areas, people's priority needs revolve around issues of access to basic services such as health, education and transport.

The BMN Venn Diagram was introduced to several groups of government health extension workers (medical officers, health assistants and family welfare assistants) in Bangladesh. Because they originated from different areas, we asked them to depict a 'typical' village. Each group participated in the construction of a diagram. Over the course of several days, a number of BMN Venn Diagrams were constructed and discussed by the different groups.

The groups were asked how they thought their diagrams would compare with those of other health extension workers and villagers. Most groups stated that 85% of villagers would have the same diagram as they did and *all* other family welfare assistants and health assistants would have exactly the same diagram as their own. They were quite surprised to see the extent of the differences, including omissions, additions, differences in priority ranking etc..

By participating in this process and comparing their results with villagers' diagrams and those of other groups, a process of attitudinal change began. Many health extension workers felt the exercise was helpful for effective programme planning and implementation. This was summarised by a health assistant who said *'first we must know the needs and ideas of villagers and then we can act'*.

Children in a variety of villages in Northwest India had the opportunity to share their perceptions of what they need for a satisfactory life. The top two priority needs of these children were parents and education. Children thought that parents were important because they provide them with food, clothing and other items. Interestingly, they stated that parents are also important because they can take over some of the work, allowing children to study! However, most village children in this area considered that their education needs were not being met satisfactorily. They were able to share some ideas as to how to improve the situation.

• Conclusion

Our experiences highlight that a 'community' is not a homogenous unit. Different groups may have different ideas on what constitutes 'basic minimum needs'. When the degree of heterogeneity is relatively high (i.e. caste, class, religion, communal distinctions, etc.), it may be necessary for different groups to construct separate BMN Venn Diagrams. These can serve to educate and increase awareness about differences in perceived needs. Used together with other PRA tools, BMN Venn Diagrams can assist in the protracted process of consensus building for community-wide action plans.

The BMN Venn diagram gives village women, men and children the opportunity to express their basic minimum needs in a manner that is meaningful to them. The diagrams and discussion can provide an entry point for the community to contemplate, discuss and reach consensus on the most significant needs in their area. The BMN Venn Diagram is proving a useful PRA tool as it enables a community to begin prioritising their needs and move from assessments to planning for action.

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