AT A GLANCE

Conducting Situational Assessments

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Introduction

Conducting a situational assessment involves a systematic process to collect, assess, analyze and apply information in order to make evidence-based decisions and recommendations."[1] It is a snapshot of the present that can be used to plan for the future by identifying and objectively considering the trends and factors that may help or hinder potential programs and policies.[2] Situational assessments are carried out to:

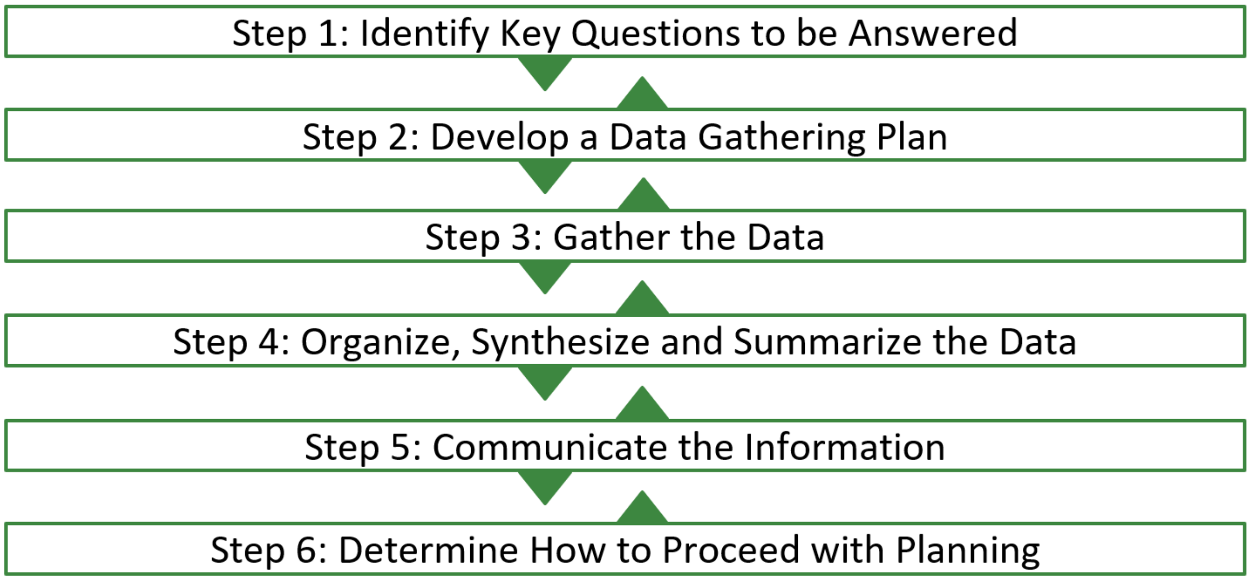
- Learn more about a population of interest (i.e., who's most affected by a certain health issue);
- Anticipate trends and issues that may affect the implementation of a strategy;
- Identify community wants, needs, and assets;
- Set priorities;
- Inform pending decisions regarding a strategy; and
- Help write funding proposals[2]

The ability to conduct situational assessments is a core competency for both public health practitioners[1] and health promoters.[3] This resource summarizes a six step model[2] for conducting situational assessments as part of the program planning process.

Six Steps for Conducting a Situational Assessment

The model and the content presented in Figure 1 summarizes materials[2] developed by The Health Communications Unit (THCU), which moved from the University of Toronto and was integrated into Public Health Ontario (PHO) operations in 2011. This content was developed based on THCU's knowledge and experience in supporting Ontario's public health units to plan and evaluate health promotion programs.

Figure 1: Six Steps for Conducting a Situational Assessment



Step 1: Identify Key Questions to be Answered

The first step in a situational assessment is to determine what you want to know: in other words, what information you require in order to inform planning decisions. Broadly speaking, a situational assessment poses three questions: What is the situation? What makes the situation better and worse? What can be done to address the situation? The prompts below can be used to shape the direction of your situational assessment and research questions.

1. **What is the situation?**
   - How does the current situation impact health outcomes, health inequities and quality of life for various groups of people?
   - Which groups of people are at higher risk of poor health outcomes, health inequities and poor quality of life?
   - How do community members and partner organizations perceive the situation? What is their capacity to act? What are their interests, mandates, current activities?
   - What are the needs, perceptions and supported directions of key influential community members and the community-at-large?
2. **What influences are making the situation better and worse?**
   - What high-risk or negative health behaviours by various groups of people are affecting the situation?
   - Which underlying determinants are driving these behaviours at the individual, community, organizational and system-level? Are there protective factors that can help avoid or alleviate the situation?
   - Which strengths and weaknesses present in your organization may affect your course of action? Which opportunities and threats in your environment may affect your course of action?

3. **What possible actions could be taken to address the situation?**
   - What are communities and other organizations doing (or what have they done in the past) to address this situation? What local policies, programs and environmental supports are being developed or implemented within the community? What evaluation data are available for these activities?
   - What strategies and/or program modifications could you feasibly implement to maximize positive impacts and minimize negative ones?
   - What evidence exists to support various courses of action?

Step 2: Develop a Data Gathering Plan

Develop a data gathering plan which details needed data and sources, tasks, action steps, and persons responsible. Include:

- Diverse types of data such as community health status indicators, environmental scans, best practices, and traditional ways of knowing.
- Different methods of data collection such as surveys, document reviews, and literature reviews.
- Varied sources of data such people with lived and living experiences, community members, partner organizations, and government.

Step 3: Gather the Data

Now that you have identified the research questions and developed a data gathering plan, the next step is to begin data collection. There are two types of data collection: primary and secondary. Primary data is data that you and your situational assessment team collect yourselves, for example via surveys, key informant interviews or focus groups. Secondary data is collected by someone else, for example, by governments, researchers, or a partner organization, and then accessed by your situational assessment team. A literature search is also an example of secondary data collection.

Step 4: Organize, Synthesize and Summarize the Data

One of the easiest ways to organize information is to arrange the data according to the key questions identified in step 1. Another approach is to use the Ecological Model[4] to identify connections between social and individual contexts, with policy and environmental contexts, allowing you to determine areas you want to address. Alternatively, a Force Field analysis is a visual way to capture the key facilitators and barriers impacting the situation. [5]

Summarize your findings in a paragraph or five to six bullet points. This will offer others a quick understanding of results and can be useful in any communication products that you develop.

Step 5: Communicate the Information

Identify the audiences who may be interested in your findings, consider which information each of them needs to know and how you can best convey it to them. Consider developing a communication plan which includes your key audience, communication objectives, channels, and communication products. You can often use the same communication products for different audiences, providing that their communication style and your communication objectives for each audience are aligned.

Step 6: Determine How to Proceed with Planning

It is now time to utilize your findings and determine how to respond best to the situation. Consider:

- How do you perceive your ability to affect the situation with the available time, financial resources and mandate?
- Are there gaps in data quality or quantity, relative to expectations from community members and partners?
- How might that restrict your ability to make evidence-informed decisions about goals, audiences, objectives, strategies, activities and resources?
- What are your next steps in the planning process? Will you proceed now, or must you revisit research questions, project scope or resources?

Conclusion

A situational assessment is an important part of planning an evidence-informed program. The steps highlighted above are intended to simplify the process into easily manageable and discrete tasks. If it is not possible to complete an entire situational assessment at this time, consider how to include components of a situational assessment in your program planning process.

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