# Community Assessment Tools

Adapted from Rotary International Community Assessment Tools accessed April 2023. For more in-depth information in the full document go to in MyLearning >>Engaging with your community.

Assessing your community’s strengths, weaknesses, needs, and assets is an essential first step in planning an effective project. By taking time to learn about your community, you can discover the most relevant opportunities for projects and maximise your club’s ability to make a meaningful impact.

## Six community assessment tools

The six assessment methods suggested are:

* Community meeting
* Focus group
* Interview
* Survey

## Community meeting

A community meeting, sometimes called a town hall or public forum, is an informal public gathering that brings together members of a community to discuss issues, voice concerns, and express preferences for community priorities.

In a community meeting, a facilitator leads discussions on issues related to the community’s strengths and potential challenges and encourages attendees to vocally participate. Before organizing a meeting, define objectives for what you wish to accomplish and provide training for your facilitator. Knowing what you hope to achieve will help you plan and host a successful meeting.

**Advantages of community meetings include:**

* Gives people of diverse backgrounds a chance to express their views
* Allows participants to build upon one another’s responses
* Can involve a fairly large group of people at one time
* Can help identify respected community leaders to involve in a project
* Can help discern the significance of a variety of issues
* Helps explore potential solutions

**Challenges with community meetings may include:**

* Can be difficult to maintain an open, comfortable, relaxed environment
* Can be difficult to keep the conversation on topic
* May be influenced by social constraints including gender disparities, power dynamics, cultural norms, etc.
* May be dominated by one or two vocal

**Please note**: Community mapping (is a facilitated activity where the group draw a map of their community, marking certain points of importance) could be incorporated into a community meeting.

## Focus groups

A focus group is a carefully guided discussion used to determine a target group’s preferences and opinions on a particular issue or idea. It can help you determine how the stakeholders believe community issues should be addressed.

Conducting a focus group requires careful planning and a skilled discussion facilitator. Most focus groups consist of six to 12 diverse stakeholders. Participants are asked a series of carefully worded open-ended questions on different issues in the community. This approach promotes self-disclosure among participants.

In a group setting, dialogue tends to evolve, and participants build on each other’s responses. An effective focus group will seem more like a collaborative discussion than a debate. It’s most effective to conduct a focus group in a private, comfortable setting, with one facilitator and someone to record participant responses.

**Advantages to using focus groups include:**

* They’re quick and easy to set up.
* Group dynamics can provide useful information that individual data collection doesn’t.
* They’re useful for gaining insight into a topic that’s not easily quantifiable.

**Challenges with focus groups may include:**

* Facilitators are susceptible to bias.
* Discussion can be dominated or side-tracked by a few individuals.
* Analysing data can be time consuming.
* They don’t provide valid information on an individual level.
* The information may not represent the whole community, which may require additional focus groups.

## Interview

Interviews are one-on-one conversations between a facilitator (the interviewer) and a community stakeholder (the respondent).

Interviews allow you to gain a deeper understanding of the respondent’s ideas and feelings. Unlike surveys, interviews give the facilitator the freedom to veer off script and ask follow-up questions. And unlike group

assessments, such as community discussions and focus groups, the respondent has the facilitator’s sole attention and is more likely to share personal opinions freely.

**Advantages to using interviews include:**

* They allow the facilitator to follow the flow of conversation and ask spontaneous questions.
* They encourage the respondent to speak freely and give spontaneous answers.
* They’re the most accurate and thorough way to obtain qualitative data from your respondents.
* They’re effective with illiterate populations.

**Challenges with interviews may include:**

* They’re time consuming.
* They reach only one respondent at a time.
* Conducting a good interview requires practice and some degree of skill.
* Finding willing respondents for “cold call” interviews can be difficult. (It’s better to schedule phone interviews in advance.)

## Survey

Surveys are a popular method for collecting information and opinions. In the context of a community assessment, a survey can be an effective way to assess the community’s perceived strengths, weaknesses, needs, and existing assets. Surveys can be general or targeted to specific segments of a community. Surveys can be delivered by email, phone, or in person.

**Advantages to using surveys include:**

* They can be administered remotely.
* They can be repeated.
* They can be completed anonymously, encouraging candid responses.
* They’re generally inexpensive to administer.

**Challenges with surveys may include:**

* Identifying prospective respondents and obtaining their personal contact information can be difficult.
* Emailed surveys are ineffective in places where Internet access is limited.
* Phone surveys may be subject to sample or interviewer bias.
* Response rates for remote surveys are generally low compared to in-person assessments.
* Written surveys are ineffective with illiterate populations.
* Written surveys don’t allow for follow-up questions.