

# Preface

Anyone who has done any type of study knows that starting the endeavor is almost always the most difficult part of the process. Going further it is often harder to think about questions and finding answers to them than it is to actually do the investigation. This is equally true of needs assessments, especially as they are conducted by organizations.

What kinds of thinking occur in organizations, agencies, and businesses that eventually lead to doing assessments? How do they start, and what activities should facilitators and needs assessment committees (NACs) be implementing to get the endeavor off the ground in a positive manner? While there is now a fair amount of literature on needs and their assessment, there is far less about how such an important activity begins and what actions enhance the promise of a fruitful outcome.

To that end, this book in the KIT deals with Phase I (preassessment) of needs assessment. What about the organizational culture and the likelihood of key decision makers being willing to shift their energies to focus on new problems and ways of operating? How open or closed is the organization? What are some relatively easy mechanisms for collecting existing data and for utilizing the skills and experiences of the individuals on the NAC to do so? If there are many potential need areas, how should the committee decide which ones to pursue? How should members sort through things? How might politics and local conditions affect what should be done? What values are there, and what role might they play?

We have provided procedures and activities that could be done in this phase. The underlying goal, once the dynamics of the setting are understood, is to rely as much as possible on information in reports, data archives, and the like. By utilizing what is available, a lot can be learned without the costs and efforts associated with getting new data. The assumption is that much information is there and ripe for the picking;

don't initiate anything until you know what is accessible and what it tells you. Tied into this thinking is a corollary that if organizations are rich in information that circumstance may by itself afford a reasonable look at needs and offer enough insight for making decisions about them. Only when there is insufficient information is it necessary to move to Phase II and expend the resources necessary for additional data collection.

❖ A NOTE ABOUT USING THE TEXT

Needs assessment is not an exact science with rules and structures that have to be followed to the letter. Every situation and context is different, and techniques will have to be adopted to fit such realities. Numerous forms, procedures, and ideas are included in the text as illustrations of what might be done but with the recognition that local imagination and ingenuity will affect how they are perceived and used. Adapt them to be more applicable to the specific assessment being undertaken and consider publishing these adaptations to enhance the work of needs assessors in other venues.

As indicated in its title this is Book 2 in the Needs Assessment KIT. The others are:

Book 1: *Needs Assessment: An Overview*

Book 3: *Needs Assessment Phase II: Collecting Data*

Book 4: *Needs Assessment: Analysis and Prioritization*

Book 5: *Needs Assessment Phase III: Taking Action for Change*

Reference, when appropriate, will be made to other books in the KIT. If you need more ideas on how to implement an assessment you are encouraged to consult them.