criteria to assess program choices

M. F. Smith
Barbara Taylor
John T. Woeste

Making decisions about which problems to address at the county level can be frustrating. One reason is that agents in most counties are faced with more demands than re-sources—and choices must be made. Previously, when political and economic support weren't in question, agents could use the "shot-gun" approach to programming and work some on all program areas. However, as resources have diminished and accountability for the use of resources has increased, a careful analysis is required in making program decisions. A second reason for frustration is that few defined procedures exist to help one make choices and provide a concrete, defensible rationale for those choices.[1]

Problem Selection Model

This article presents a problem selection model for programming in Extension. Similar to a theory, it fulfills three functions: serves as a unifying phenomenon, contains a homogeneous group of assumptions or definitions, and has value in predictions.[2] It helps the user to *analyze* data, to make a short-hand summarization or *synopsis* of data and relations. Its function is to serve as a tool, as something to think with, to help in one's work.

This model is built on concepts from curriculum theory and on empirical data from field work in Extension, and is expressed as a set of related assumptions about what influences program planning in Extension. It guides the actions of planners in predicting which problems will have the most payoff for the local clients and for the organization

of Extension, and gives the planner a concrete means to explain to others the rationale for specific program choices.

Assumptions   Our assumptions about what influences program planning in Extension are presented here as criteria that serve as screens for prioritizing identified problems. As shown in Figure 1, a grid is used to guide the process. Criteria are listed on the horizontal axis of the grid and the identified problems on the vertical. Each problem is analyzed against each criterion. Current programs (or problems they address) are also analyzed on the same criteria and at the same time to put new problems in perspective with present programming efforts. All the cells in the grid are completed for each problem before a decision is made for final determination of program emphasis.

We believe all the criteria are important, but the relative importance of individual criteria may differ from county to county and sometimes for different problems within a county. The grid wasn't designed to lead to a sum or score that would automatically indicate if a problem should receive program emphasis. Some counties (agents) may want to assign specific weights to the criteria, but that's not necessary for the process to be useful in analyzing and documenting the important determinants of major program success or failure.

Implementing a program without sound planning runs the risk of both failing and wasting valuable resources. This article has presented an example for problem selection for program planning that will minimize that risk. . . .

Whether the criteria are weighted or not, it's essential that the first criterion (correlation with Extension mission and support base) be met before proceeding with program development. Failure to meet some of the other criteria doesn't necessarily mean that the problem is abandoned, but rather that preliminary work be done before a problem is selected to assure decision makers, planners, and funders that conditions are favorable for success.

The use of these criteria is predicated on two assumptions: (1) the agent has provided program leadership to individuals/groups making input to problems so they can respond from an informed basis, that is, they understand community trends and the direction of new information and

Upper grid:

PROBLEMS/NEEDS	MISSION	INDICATION OF NEED						
New data & Present programs	Correlation with Extension Mission and Support Base	Identified by Key Informants	Importance to Citizens	Importance to "Others"	Requests to CES Office	Identified by Program Funders	Identified by other Agencies	Defined in other sources

Lower grid:

COMMUNITY SUPPORT				IMPACT			ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT				
Support by Program Funders	Support by other agencies	Community Barriers	Public Interest	Previous Success	Expected Payoff	Time to show Results	Correlation with State Program Area Priorities	Staff Competency	Teaching Materials	Funds for Consumables	Facilities and Equipment

Figure 1. Criteria grid for choosing problems for long-range program development.

technology and (2) input has come from a sufficient number and type of individuals/groups to assure the credibility of the input.

Criteria   Twenty criteria are presented and grouped by Extension mission, indication of need, community support, impact, and organizational support. Explanations for the criteria are listed as questions the agent can answer to determine the potential success or failure of a program under the conditions for that particular county.

Extension Mission   *Correlation with Extension mission and support base.* Is the problem amenable to solution through an educational program? Does it fit within the areas of Extension's mission—for example, agriculture, natural resources, youth, home economics, community resource development, and in some states, energy and marine science? If so, is the relationship very strong—a problem that's obviously within the purview of Extension, or is it weak—a problem that Extension could address only if the mission is interpreted very broadly? (If it's the latter, the support may NOT be available in terms of a research base, teaching materials, and organizational/political/public sanction.)

Indication of Need   *Identified by key informants.* Through formal or informal input, have community leaders and influential members of target populations recognized that the problem exists? If so, how extensive among leaders was the recognition?

Importance to citizens. Was the problem/need identified as important by advisory committees and/or through a client survey?

Importance to others. Was the problem identified as important for other citizens through advisory committee input and/or through a client survey? If so, do the others recognize the problem and rate it at the same level of importance?

Requests to CES office. How many calls/letters to the CES office identified the problem and/or requested information on the topic? What percentage does this number represent in terms of all calls/letters to the CES office?

Identified by program funders. Is the problem one that county commissioners identified as important? Was that identification a public declaration or just a passing comment? Have experts at the state and/or national levels identified the need?

Identified by other agencies. How many other agencies are presently working on the problem? Do other agencies see it as an appropriate area for Extension education?

Defined in other sources. Are data available from other sources that show evidence of need? Can benchmark points be established with these data?

Community Support

Support of program funders. Is the need one that program funders are expected to see as important? Will they consider a program focusing on that problem as good use of funds? (If they identified the need, that support *might* be assured. However, public identification and private support may not be synonymous.)

Support of other agencies. What's the possibility of programmatic linkages with other agencies to solve the problem? If linkage occurred, could Extension appropriately show results for its portion of resources expended?

Community barriers. Are there reasons the public or target population might believe that the problem should NOT be addressed by Extension? Will the program effort conflict with widespread social (beliefs/values) or economic interests of the people in the community?

Public interest. What's the level of awareness and interest by the target population? Will the appropriate audience want to participate in solving the problem? How much energy (resources) will need to be expended to create the needed awareness/interest? (If a client survey has been conducted and the response rate was credible, that data may supply an indication of the amount of interest by the target population. However, rating a concern as important isn't the same as being willing to do something about it.)

Impact

Previous success. Is the need one that has already been addressed in CES programs? If so, how successful were the programs? Did the appropriate audience participate? Has the need decreased as a result of these efforts?

Expected payoff. Can the benefits be identified? If other agencies are working on the problem, can Extension's contribution be separated out? Will the benefits be worth the costs? What's the perceived significance of the impact relative to other problems/needs?

Time to show results. How urgent is it that the need be addressed? How long will it take to produce the results? (If a formal needs assessment has been conducted, there may be political reasons to implement a program on an identified need on which quick results can be attained. At the beginning, it may be more important, politically, to show that needs assessment data are being used than it is to work on the "most important" problem.)

Smith/Taylor/Woeste: Criteria To Assess Program Choices

Organizational
Support

Correlation with state program area priorities. Is the need one that has been identified as important at the state level? Is the relationship very strong—identified specifically, or is it weak—would fit only with a broad interpretation of the state priorities? How important is it that selected needs fit the priorities? (If the correlation is low or nonexistent, local programs addressing the need may require increased support from the local level.)

Staff competency. Are the local staff equipped to work in the problem area? Do they have the required educational competency? Are specialists available to help where needed? Can volunteers and other community resources be secured?

Teaching materials. Are materials from Extension or other sources already developed to use in an educational program? How much more will be needed? What's the estimate of success in getting needed materials by the time the program will be implemented?

Funds for consumables. Are funds available for the purchase of materials (food, seed, fertilizer) that will be consumed in the program?

Facilities and equipment. Are appropriate meeting places available? Is equipment available when it's needed?

Conclusion

Implementing a program without sound planning runs the risk of both failing and wasting valuable resources. This article has presented a model for problem selection for program planning that will minimize that risk. The approach has been used with new agents and those with years of experience. For the new agent, the criteria are particularly helpful in clarifying a critical aspect of program decision making that in the past has been nebulous and hard to explain. For both the new and the experienced agent, the grid, when completed, provides a concrete, defensible rationale for why specific choices were made.

Footnotes

1. Several Extension documents over the past 20 years have spoken to the requirement of establishing priorities for program development. For example, in 1965, Boyle discussed 5 phases of the programming process. In Phase IV, he indicated that "priorities should be established for the problems identified"—but no mechanism was provided. In 1971, Boone, Dolan, and Shearon indicated that "change agents must delineate, order, and sequence micro needs of learners inferred for each macro need"—no suggestions were provided for deciding which macro needs to select. In 1974, an ECOP subcommittee chaired by Lawrence suggested as a part of the program determination step that a planning unit should "determine program priorities and

objectives and relate them to state and/or national purposes"—no criteria were listed for this determination. In 1975, Pilgram and Borich listed 5 steps that "if followed objectively will lead to the most acceptable listing of people needs in program development." One of these steps was "making decisions,"in which the suggested techniques were "obtaining consensus, voting, reporting"—but no specific criteria or strategies were listed for implementing the techniques. In 1981, Boyle indicated that the "critical step in priority setting is establishing the criteria upon which decisions will be made." He listed six sources that influence programming decisions, but didn't define specific criteria for any of them.

Full bibliographical listings for the above references are: E. J. Boone, R. J. Dolan, and R. W. Shearon, *Programming in Cooperative Extension Service: A Conceptual Schema,* Miscellaneous Extension Publication 72 (Raleigh: North Carolina State University, Agricultural Extension Service, 1971); P. G. Boyle, *The Program Planning Process with Emphasis on Extension,* Publication No. 24 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1965); P. G. Boyle, *Planning Better Programs* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1981); Roger L. Lawrence, *Extension Program Development and Its Relationship to Extension Management Information Systems* (Ames: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1974); and E. Pilgram and P. Borich, *Minnesota Extension Program Development Process, Part 2, Frame of Reference,* Special Report 47 (St. Paul: University of Minnesota, Agricultural Extension Service, 1975).

2.   George A. Beauchamp, *Curriculum Theory,* 2nd ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: The Kagg Press, 1968).