DOCUMENT OR DATA REVIEW

Purpose

The purpose of conducting a document or data review is to review a variety of existing sources (for example, documents, reports, data files, and other written artifacts) with the intention of collecting independently verifiable data and information.

Needs Assessment Applications

Many times the information required to complete a needs assessment has already been collected for other purposes. For example, similar data to what you are looking for may have been previously collected for generating other reports, papers, or research. Ministries, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other organizations often collect and/or produce the valuable data or reports that can supplement your own data collection as part of your needs assessment. The document and data review process provides you with a systematic procedure for identifying, analyzing, and deriving useful information from the existing documents so you can make informed decisions.

Today, many government agencies, multilateral institutions, and other organizations are making documents and data sets available to the public (see box 3A.1). In 2011, the World Bank, for instance, expanded its access to information policies, thereby making many of its databases and project reports available on its public website. What is available varies widely, ranging from, for example, (a) planning documents related to small development projects in Africa, to (b) evaluation reports on a country's progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals, to (c) global information system maps showing crime hot spots in a city, to (d) health sector indicators for a particular nation.

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Box 3A.1 Source Samples

Sample Sources for Documents

- World Bank project reports (including monitoring and evaluation reports) are available at http://go.worldbank.org/0FRO32VEI0.
- United Nations Development Programme reports can be found at http://www.undp.org/publications/.
- Publications from the Center for Global Development are at http://www.cgdev.org/section/publications.
- Country-level progress reports on the Millennium Development Goals can be found at http://mdgs.un.org.

Sample Sources for Databases

- Finance and project data from a number of development institutions are integrated at http://www.aiddata.org.
- Data and data sets from a vast array of U.S. government projects are now available at http://www.data.gov.
- World Bank data sets are available at http://data.worldbank.org/.
- United Nations databases are largely available through http://data.un.org/.
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development also provides data resources at http://stats.oecd.org/.

Access to information is, nevertheless, an essential starting place for any document review process. Look broadly for resources that already have the data you require to make decisions. Such resources can save you lots of time and money.

In the context of international development, the documents and data available are heavily biased toward the English language, as well as toward those with ready access to the Internet and basic skills to navigate the databases. Nevertheless, such initiatives are a start toward putting useful information in the hands of the public across the globe. We expect that this trend will grow with governments and organizations that are investing in establishing policies and information systems toward that end.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- The information contained in extant data or documents is often independently verifiable.

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- The document or data review process can be done independently and without having to solicit extensive input from other sources.
- A document or data review is typically less expensive than collecting the data on your own.

Disadvantages

- Information in the documents or data may represent a perspective that is not aligned with your needs assessment project. For example, the perspective of government reports may not be aligned with those of development organizations.
- Data in the document sources may not be exactly what you want for your needs assessment. For instance, you may want environmental records by village but extant records may document only by province.
- Obtaining and analyzing necessary documents can be a time-consuming process.
- You will not be able to control the quality of data being collected and must rely on the information provided in the documents as you assess quality and usability of the sources.

Process Overview

1. From a list of information required to complete your needs assessment, identify those elements or indicators that may be contained in previously written reports, planning papers, research synopses, or other documents. For instance, if you require statistics on the population growth within a region, then identify several government (or potentially United Nations) reports that provide the necessary information. Both published and unpublished sources can be considered for inclusion, though the validity of unpublished materials can make your quality assurance efforts more difficult.
2. Consider developing a list of characteristics (or attributes) that you are looking for in an existing record; that approach can help you identify a comprehensive list of available resources. For example, (a) do you want to use only data that were collected through internationally funded efforts, or (b) do you want only information that has been published with full disclosure of the participants and of the methods used to collect the

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data, or (c) do you want only records from the past 10 years, or (d) do you need a combination of those elements?

3. For each item of required information that could potentially be found in an existing document, list three to five potential resources for obtaining that information. For instance, imagine that your needs assessment requires information on the number of current employees within a government agency who have the qualifications to perform financial audits. In this case, you want to determine which currently available agency documents or data monitoring systems may include such information, where those documents might be located, and from whom the documents can be obtained.
4. Identify the individual(s) who will be invited to participate in the document review. Most often, you want to invite at least two people to review each document, and you can also be a reviewer when appropriate. Having two or more reviewers improves the reliability of the reviews and gives you the opportunity to compare across reviews.
5. Develop a document or data review protocol, checklist, or examination form that can be used systematically by each reviewer to ensure that valuable information is identified, analyzed, coded, and documented. Be sure to include space at the top of each protocol, checklist, or examination form for the reviewer to describe the document and to state where it is stored if additional information is required later. As appropriate in the protocol, you should ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results will be represented, along with the required information at each level of the program or project results chain.
6. Generate guidelines for using the protocol or checklist or the examination form in the review process. Consider providing a "positive example" of a completed review protocol, checklist, or examination form. Be sure to highlight how information can be recorded on the form to maximize its clarity and usability in the needs assessment process.
7. As each document or data set is reviewed, have the reviewer(s) complete the protocol, checklist, or examination form to verify that all useful information is documented.
8. When all of the relevant files have been reviewed, have all reviewers meet to collectively document the findings of their reviews (or what information has been collected through the document review process). In particular, the reviewers should identify specific instances where informa-

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tion from different documents may disagree, where there are instances of multiple documents containing similar information, where additional information may be located, and what information may have to be collected directly through the needs assessment.

9. Collect the reviewers' documented findings from the review process, and codify the findings for inclusion in the needs assessment. Identify any conclusions regarding needs, root causes, and recommendations for addressing identified needs.

Tips for Success

- Be systematic in your review processes. From identifying potential documents and developing a review protocol to collectively reviewing the information attained through the review of multiple documents, systematic processes should ensure that valuable information is not missed during the review.
- Triangulate data to the extent possible. In other words, when the document review yields data or information that may directly feed into the needs assessment, attempt to locate the confirmatory data or information by examining other independent sources. If the data or information can be triangulated, it can increase your confidence in its accuracy.
- When multiple reviewers are tasked with the role of reviewing document sources, provide clear and consistent guidelines to all reviewers on the procedures for completing the protocol, checklist, or examination form. Ensuring that all reviewers receive the same guidelines for the protocol, checklist, or examination form will make certain that the information is identified, analyzed, coded, and documented in a consistent and reliable manner.

Reference

Witkin, Belle Ruth, and James W. Altschuld. 1995. *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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