



# COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

A resource for Rotary projects



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 maximize your club's ability to make a meaningful impact.

A community assessment can help you get a better understanding of the dynamics of your community and help both you and the beneficiaries make important decisions about service priorities. Even if you're actively involved in your community, an assessment can reveal additional strengths and opportunities for growth. Perhaps you'll find a new way to address a known issue. Before you start an assessment, consider what you specifically want to learn about your community. An effective assessment will reveal things you did not know before.

Doing an assessment also helps you build valuable relationships and encourages community members to actively participate in making lasting improvements. It's a critical first step in creating trust, community ownership, and sustainability

Not sure where to start? Encourage community volunteers to form a Rotary Community Corps. An RCC is a team of men and women who aren't Rotarians but work in partnership with Rotary clubs to improve their communities. Sponsoring an RCC is a great way to fully integrate community members as your partners in service. Learn more at [www.rotary.org/myrotary/rcc](http://www.rotary.org/myrotary/rcc).

Having casual conversations with just one or two people isn't an effective way of finding out what a community needs. Assessments should be systematic, involve a wide variety of community stakeholders and beneficiaries, and engage them in a meaningful way.

### Six community assessment tools

The six assessment methods presented here aren't exclusive. You can combine or adapt them to best suit your club's resources and the preferences of the people you wish to engage with.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
|  Community meeting |  Focus group       |
|  Survey            |  Asset inventory   |
|  Interview         |  Community mapping |

### TIPS FOR CONDUCTING ANY ASSESSMENT

**Remain open minded.** Don't presume you know what the community needs.

**Choose participants carefully.** Consider the makeup of the community and ensure that you include a diverse cross-section of relevant groups (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, religion, income level, vocations).

**Include overlooked or marginalized groups.** Women, young people, the elderly, and religious or ethnic minorities are often overlooked. Keep the community's social dynamics in mind and provide a forum where they feel comfortable sharing their views.

**Consider yourself an outsider.** Even if the community you want to work with is local, find a well-connected individual, group, or organization that can introduce you to your target stakeholder groups.

**Don't promise a project before you make a decision.** But do assure participants that you'll let them know what your club decides. Invite them to take part in any future activities.

## Recommended Stakeholders for Rotary's Areas of Focus

### Peace and conflict prevention/ resolution

- Victims of violence, refugees, or internally displaced people
- Perpetrators of violence
- Factions that are at odds with each other
- Civil society organizations
- Schools and educational institutions
- Local government and law enforcement authorities

### Water and sanitation

- Parent associations
- School administration
- Teachers
- Students
- District municipalities
- Ministries of education and health
- Utility companies
- Farmers
- Governmental water authority
- Service providers (hand pump mechanics, community outreach workers, etc.)

### **Basic education and literacy**

- Teachers
- Parents
- Students
- Out of school youth
- School administrators
- School management committees
- Ministry of education
- Adult education institutes
- Vocational training institutes
- Community and technical colleges
- Libraries/librarians

### **Disease prevention and treatment & maternal and child health**

Individual health care recipients:

- Pregnant women
- At-risk children
- Adults at risk for noncommunicable and communicable diseases
- At-risk aging population
- Community health centers and hospitals
- Mobile outreach systems
- Community health care workers
- Skilled birth attendants
- Health care professionals (nurses, doctors, midwives, technicians, specialists, etc.)
- Access and continuum of care structures:
  - Prevention, primary care, and referral systems
  - Transport
  - Hospitalization and follow-up services
  - Rehabilitation services
  - Chronic care support and palliative/hospice care systems

### **Economic and community development**

- Local government authorities
- Entrepreneurs
- Farmers
- Unemployed youth and adults
- Business owners
- Banks
- Cooperatives (agricultural, savings/loan, etc.)

- Microfinance institutions
- Vocational training institutions
- Community colleges
- Secondary schools
- Universities
- Adult education organizations



### **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. The facilitator also directs any questions to known subject matter experts. It is advisable to appoint a locally respected individual or a representative from a community organization to serve as the meeting facilitator, particularly if there are any cultural or language barriers between your club and the community being served. 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 participants to the exclusion of others

### Addressing challenges in community meetings

- If certain participants are dominating the conversation, make a point of asking others for their ideas.
- Watch body language and make adjustments as necessary. Maybe the facilitator needs a break, or you need to stop someone from speaking too much. A quick five-minute break can help refocus the discussion.
- Use encouraging body language and tone of voice, as well as words. For instance, lean forward when people are talking, keep your body position open and approachable, and be attentive to everyone, not just those who are most articulate.
- Pay attention to group dynamics. Be aware of emotional reactions participants may have to others' comments, particularly if they appear to be upset, hurt, angry, or defensive. A trained facilitator should encourage participants to follow ground rules and express themselves without making personal accusations or embarrassing others. If participants seem puzzled or confused, revisit the comments or points that caused the confusion or try to restate them more clearly.
- Keep the meeting on topic. If you need to refocus the discussion, summarize the points that have been made and ask if anyone has additional thoughts about the original question.

### Following up after a community meeting

- Thank participants for attending and sharing their feedback.
- Summarize key findings and outline any action plans moving forward.
- If a project is identified, consider inviting key stakeholders to assist with the initiative.

## TIPS FOR HOSTING A COMMUNITY MEETING

**Identify your goals.** What insight do you hope to gain from this meeting? Are there specific issues in the community that you want to better understand? Design questions that will provoke constructive answers.

**Select an accessible location and convenient time.** Host the discussion at a venue that is easy to find and easy to access. Consider the participants' schedules when determining a time.

**Promote the event throughout the community.** Be mindful of cultural values and norms that may affect responses (for example, in some communities women may not feel empowered to talk openly and honestly in the presence of men). Factor in the level of literacy in the community and how residents normally receive information (e.g., fliers, radio, announcements at schools or houses of worship).

**Prepare a list of questions.** Keep your questions simple and concise. If you hear new concerns or the same issues being raised by participants, follow up on their responses with leading questions.

**Set and follow a schedule.** Decide how much time should be spent on each question and factor in new questions based on issues/ideas identified during the discussion.

**Set and state ground rules.** Share ground rules with participants before the meeting begins to prevent one or two participants from monopolizing the forum, help engage every member in the discussion, and keep the conversation on track.

**Take notes.** Write down ideas publicly so everyone can see the notes during the discussion. Enlist one or two others to help you keep track of the conversation.

**Be an active listener.** Let all participants know that you're engaged and interested in what they have to say. Be considerate of their time.

**Ask participants to elaborate.** Ask follow-up questions if you don't understand their feedback.

**Allow for small group discussions.** Small groups can be effective in helping to ensure more speaking opportunities for attendees. Ask each group to record notes, and have a designated group member briefly summarize their discussion for the larger audience. Consider the composition of small group members to enhance communication opportunities for those community members less likely to speak out (a group of all women, young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc.).



## 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.

### Types of survey questions

- **Multiple choice questions.** Respondents select one or more options from a list. Multiple choice questions work best to use when you have a fixed number of options.

**Example:** *What do you feel are the most pressing needs in your community (select two):*

- Health care
- Quality of education
- Employment opportunities
- Public safety
- Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

- **Open-ended questions.** Respondents answer questions in their own words. This format can elicit more nuanced responses, but survey results aren’t as easily quantifiable and must be individually analyzed.

**Example:** *If you could improve one aspect of your community, what would it be and why?*

- **Demographic questions.** Demographic information (e.g., gender, education, income level) can add context to responses that will reveal trends within a larger population.

**Example:** *What is your age?*

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

- **Rating scales.** Respondents rate their opinion of a statement or set of statements along a range of feelings or attitudes.

**Example:** *Please respond to each statement about your school:*

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neither Agree nor Disagree	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree
The number of teachers is sufficient.					
Our teachers are well-qualified.					
Our school provides a safe environment for our children.					
Our classrooms are well-equipped.					
I am familiar with my child’s curriculum.					
I regularly help my child with homework.					
Our school provides nutritious meals.					

## TIPS FOR DESIGNING A GOOD SURVEY

**Explain why you're asking the questions.** Participants are more likely to respond if they feel there will be a valuable outcome, like the possibility of a future project that will attempt to address their needs.

**Keep it short and simple.** If your survey is too long, respondents may rush their responses or even drop out of the survey before completing it. Make sure your questions are brief and specific.

**Make sure your questions are unbiased.** Avoid leading questions like "Would you like to see a new library in the vacant lot instead of a playground?" in favor of a more neutral form: "What would you like to see developed in the vacant lot? A) library B) playground C) other (please describe)"

**Conduct a small pilot of the survey.** Testing your survey can reveal whether your questions are clear and specific.



## 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.)

## TIPS FOR DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING A GOOD INTERVIEW

**Identify your goals.** What insight do you hope to gain from this interview? Are there specific issues in the community you want to better understand? Design questions that will provoke constructive answers.

**Identify your target respondents.** Whose opinions are you interested in understanding? Will you identify specific individuals to invite to appointments or will you solicit random participants in a public place?

**Prepare your interview questions.** Keep your questions as simple and concise as possible. If you have complex questions to ask, ask them toward the end of the interview. If you have sensitive questions to ask, be sure to conduct your interview in a private place. Keep your choice of words at a third-grade reading level.

**Practice.** Conduct some mock interviews with your colleagues and solicit their feedback.

**Establish rapport.** Make your respondent feel comfortable before you dive into your questions.

**Conduct your interview like a real conversation.** It's best to have your questions committed to memory so you can ask them naturally, switching up the order and adding impromptu follow-up questions as needed.

**Take accurate notes.** If you're recording your conversation instead, get the respondent's consent beforehand.

**Be an active listener.** Show your respondent that you're engaged and interested. Be considerate of their time. After all, this may be the first conversation in a long and productive service partnership!

**Ask respondents to elaborate.** Simple yes/no answers won't yield much useful information. Probe further with follow-up questions and ask respondents to clarify if you don't understand. You may want to prepare specific prompts for drawing out additional information.

For example:

**Question:** How easy is it to get health care in your community?

### Prompts:

- Is it easy to get to a hospital in your community? Is it easy to get medical treatment at the hospital?
- Do you visit the hospital for check-ups, or only for emergencies?
- In your experience, is medical care affordable? Do you need to have insurance?
- What happens to uninsured people? Where do they go?
- Have you or anyone you know gone without medical treatment due to the cost?

## TIPS FOR DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING A GOOD INTERVIEW (continued)

**Offer to follow up with respondents.** Ask your respondents if they'd like to be contacted to participate in future assessments or community improvement activities that may result from your assessment. Avoid creating an expectation of following-up and then not following through.



### Focus Group

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.

While you want a diverse group of participants, keep cultural beliefs and community structure in mind. In some communities, women may not feel comfortable expressing their opinions in front of male facilitators or men from the community. Similarly, youth may not feel comfortable expressing their opinions in front of adults. You may need to host a number of focus groups with different participants based on occupation, age, gender, family structure, or other factors.

#### 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.
- They're effective with illiterate populations.

#### Challenges with focus groups may include:

- Facilitators are susceptible to bias.
- Discussion can be dominated or sidetracked by a few individuals.
- Analyzing 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.

#### Preparing questions

Develop a list of concepts you wish to discuss. These could include issues your club thinks might exist in the community, ideas for projects, or people's perceptions of community resources. Make sure your questions will help guide the discussion and encourage participants to share their ideas. Focus group questions include:

- **Opening questions** get participants talking and feeling comfortable. They should be easy to answer.
  - How long have you worked at the school?
  - What do you teach/which position do you hold?
- **Introductory questions** get the group thinking about the topic and focus the conversation.
  - If you could change three things at the school, what would you change and why?
- **Transition questions** prepare participants for the in-depth conversation.
  - Why do you think 50 percent of girls stop attending the school after their second year?
- **Key questions** focus on major areas of concern and guide the majority of the discussion.
  - What resources and training does the school need to encourage girls to return after their second year?
  - What resources and training do families need to send their daughters back to school after their second year?

- **Closing questions** wrap up the discussion and allow participants to voice any final thoughts.
  - Do you know any parents who would be interested in sharing why they didn't send their daughters to school after the second year?
  - Do you know any parents who want their daughter to return to school but are unable to send her?

### Following up with participants

After completing the focus group, thank participants for their time and input. Consider how you'll follow-up with them and maintain relationships. Share your conclusions with focus group participants. Consider inviting participants to be involved in the project in some capacity, if appropriate.

### Variations

- Hold separate focus groups on the same issue with members of your club and members from the community. Are the responses the same or different? Were additional concerns or factors expressed that you had not previously considered?
- Separate groups according to subgroup characteristics, such as gender, age, education or literacy, disability, ethnicity, etc.



## Asset Inventory

An asset inventory identifies various types of resources in a community, including its people, physical environment, institutions, services, and events. To conduct the inventory, participants identify people, places, and things they think are valuable and then document and analyze their findings. The resulting inventory identifies assets and can start the process of exploring the interconnectedness of those assets and how they can be used to create positive change.

### Advantages to using an asset inventory include:

- Maximizes available resources
- Encourages the creation of broad, inclusive networks to affect change
- Helps identify areas of community member interest
- Can be maintained, expanded, and used repeatedly

### Challenges with asset inventories may include:

- Data analysis can be time consuming.
- Organizing assets and identifying interconnectedness can be difficult.
- Interests, skills, and other nonphysical assets can be easily overlooked.

## TIPS FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

**Select a location that's convenient,** private, and comfortable for a small-group discussion and a time that participants can attend.

If your facilitator is someone local, **provide training** beforehand.

**Arrange for another facilitator to record the focus group session or take public notes of participants' responses.** Periodically ask participants if the notes accurately capture the group's input.

**Invite Rotary Community Corps members** to participate in focus group activities.

**Invite six to 12 participants,** an ideal size for a focus group. Make sure they're representative of the community and interested and willing to provide feedback.

**Explain the purpose of the focus group, and state your goals openly.** Establish simple ground rules to promote positive interaction and confidence in the process.

**Introduce the main topic of discussion, and guide the discussion using your prepared questions.** Establish a schedule beforehand, such as 10-15 minutes per question.

**Allow each person time to answer.** Listen carefully to the ideas expressed and ask for clarification if needed, but avoid confrontations or debates.

**Allow participants to respond to comments.** Make sure the discussion and comments stay on topic.

### Suggested inventory questions:

- What is special about your community?
- What products are made in your community?
- What events take place in your community?
- When and where do people gather, and what do they do together? Include religious, social service, sporting, entertainment, and other types of gatherings.
- Who do you know? What skills do they have? What do they own? What do they know about that might be taught to others?
- Is there an enterprising spirit in your community, either in business or civic/cultural activities?
- What topics or issues interest a significant number of community members?
- What institutions exist in the community, both private and public?
- Who are the formal and informal leaders of the community? Who do people listen to?
- How does information spread in your community?
- What services are provided in your community? Who provides them?
- What natural resources are found in your community? Which areas have open space?
- What skills or knowledge in your community should be passed down to the next generation?
- What businesses exist in your community?
- What volunteer activities exist in your community, both formal and informal?
- How do community members demonstrate that they care for and trust their neighbors?

### Sample Community Assets

- Skill of older community members in gardening, canning, and preserving home-grown fruits and vegetables
- Interest of youth in learning about and practicing computer programming
- Enterprising spirit of a group of potential business owners
- Sporting venues, parks, forests, and other green spaces
- Parent associations, religious congregations, and other volunteer groups
- Common practice of sharing food with the sick and visiting the elderly
- Cultural activities and events coordinated by immigrants in the community

### Variations

- Divide participants into groups by gender, age, or profession to reveal the ways different groups view the community.
- Instead of a broad-based inventory, choose a specific community issue such as education or health and create an inventory of only those assets.
- Incorporate a walk or drive around the community to encourage an expansive approach to identifying assets.

## TIPS FOR CONDUCTING AN ASSET INVENTORY

**Determine what you want to inventory**, and identify potential participants.

**Invite a small, diverse group of community members** to conduct the inventory in one or more sessions.

**Use strong group facilitators to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute** and that each discussion group stays on task and on time.

**Analyze the results.** Organize assets by category and document interconnections.

**Use available assets to create coalitions and networks** to address community issues.

**Update and maintain the inventory regularly.**



## Community Mapping

Community mapping is used to reveal different perspectives about a community.

It requires few resources and little time and can be adapted for participants of virtually any age or educational background.

In this facilitated activity, individuals or groups draw a map of their community, marking certain points of importance and noting how often they visit these places. A facilitator leads a discussion about the maps, while another facilitator records the discussion. A successful community mapping exercise will get participants to:

- Identify how they use community resources and any barriers they experience in accessing these resources
- Compare perceptions of the importance of various community resources
- Generate ideas for community improvement

### Advantages of community mapping include:

- It's a lively and engaging activity.
- It encourages participants to discuss how they might improve their community.
- Activity can be broken up into multiple sessions with different community stakeholder groups.

### Challenges with community mapping may include:

- Analyzing results can be a difficult process, because the information is gathered in a visual format.
- Drawing conclusions from the maps and determining next steps may require additional assessment activities.

### What to map

- Places of residence
- Places of importance to them, such as markets, religious centers, schools, community centers, parks, businesses, fields, water sources, government offices, health clinics, police stations, and recreational areas
- Places where they spend the most time, using different colors to indicate daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly visits
- Places where they enjoy and don't enjoy spending time, indicated by different colors of markers
- Places they'd like to add to the community, indicated by sticky notes or small squares of paper

## TIPS FOR COMMUNITY MAPPING

**Keep groups small** — perhaps no more than 20 participants, divided into groups of four to six.

**Help each group draw a map based on their own definition of the community.** The wealth of information resulting from the maps will come from their variety and differences.

### In the large group, discuss all the maps:

- What are the differences between the maps?
- Why might the differences be important?
- What are the similarities between the maps?
- What important aspects of the community are implied by the similarities?
- What places were suggested to be added to the community? How would these places improve the community?
- Do the maps indicate any specific activities or projects that might improve the community?

**Ask participants to volunteer to join a committee** to further analyze the maps and identify next steps.

### Variations

- Separate participants into small groups by gender, age, ethnicity, profession, etc., to encourage diversity of the resulting maps.
- Have groups tour the community before drawing their maps.
- Ask participants to identify a central place in the community to help orient everyone's maps.



One Rotary Center  
1560 Sherman Avenue  
Evanston, IL 60201-3698 USA  
[www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org)