



Executive Summary of Planning Stage Research Methods

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During the planning phase Partners for Prosperity (P4P) utilized research designed to uncover regional definitions of poverty and prosperity and to prepare a strategic plan to reduce poverty in Eastern Idaho. The purpose of this summary is to review the research methods used during the planning phase and analyze the efficacy and the future applicability of these methods. This evaluation is based on input from P4P staff members and the notes, interviews, strategic plan, and other P4P documents available from that time.

According to the strategic plan, P4P employed a multi-methodological approach to collect and analyze data in order to capture the dynamic characteristics of poverty. From September 2002, through June 2003, P4P contacted approximately 2,500 people throughout the Eastern Idaho regional community to gather input for the strategic plan. The primary data used in the initiative was qualitative and focused on listening to the voices of people in poverty and creating an open forum for the expression of ideas. Six major methods were used to collect information from the regional community: ethnographic interviews; Steering Committee meetings; asset mapping; community dialogue meetings; an Idea Forum; and a 'Do No Harm' panel.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWING

Overview of Method

The purpose of the ethnographic interviews was to understand the phenomenon of poverty from the view of those experiencing it. Community members had suggested the use of an inductive approach to discover how poverty is defined by those living in it. Initially, the interviews were to be structured after the model of interviewing developed by James P. Spradley (1979) called "Ethnographic Interviewing." Spradley's method has been used to help build an ethnography of subcultures and requires that a series of interviews be conducted with each informant. Because of time constraints the method was modified to include a single, non-structured interview with volunteers who currently or have recently defined themselves to be in poverty. Due to restraints imposed by the Idaho State University Human Subjects Committee, people living in poverty self-selected to be informants. There was an element of a snowball effect to the sampling. Individuals who participated in the interviewing process told acquaintances about the opportunity and they told their associates, etc. It should be noted that informants were reimbursed for mileage and childcare costs incurred during the interview. This minor reimbursement of costs may have been a motivating factor for informant participation.

The actual interviews were conducted by a number of persons. The interviewers had been directed to introduce the study and to ask the participant to tell her/his story as it related to poverty. The interviewers took an active listening role, only asking enough questions to



keep the informant talking. Interviews were anticipated to take about ½ to 1 hour to complete. Most of the interviews took longer. Some of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the informant and some were conducted in office settings. All of the interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed. The interviewers also took field notes of the interviewing experience.

Following transcription of the interviews, a synopsis was completed by the interviewer. This synopsis included the interviewer's impression of both the interview and the informant. The synopsis and transcribed interviews were both used in the classification of the interviews and the definition of poverty. People were grouped according to race, ethnicity, and location of residence. Various themes were drawn from the interviews themselves and the synopses for each group. The themes were reported in the strategic plan and were used to define poverty and prosperity.

Efficacy

The term “efficacy” can be understood in two related but different ways. One interpretation of the efficacy of the interviews would be to look at the efficacy of the research method as a tool in formulating an ethnography of the persons living in poverty and using the interview as a tool in uncovering the inductive meaning of poverty and prosperity. The second use of the term “efficacy” would imply empowerment. The question here would address how the interviews worked to politically empower those who were interviewed. This summary will address each of these definitions in turn.

As a tool in uncovering the meaning of poverty for people in the region, the interviews proved to have mixed results. Originally, it was thought that the interviews would be used to produce an ethnography of people in poverty. Due to some problems in the way that the interviews were conducted this ethnography was not complete. It was also anticipated that 120 interviews would be conducted in several key areas throughout the region. The number of anticipated interviews was reduced by almost a third. Of these interviews there were some problems with validity and reliability and the sampling method. Because of these problems and the structure of the interviews, the efficiency of the method was reduced. However the interviews did produce a massive amount of information about the lives of people interviewed and their experience with poverty. General themes and patterns emerged and were identified. A social science description was created based on the analysis of the interviews. This description helped to build the definitions used in the planning stage. What emerged from interviews included ideas about poverty that had not been previously included in the definition. The inductive method of appealing to the people for their experiences helped secure the trust of both the people in poverty and other stakeholders in the community. The interviewing method proved to be innovative in that the categories and patterns used to define poverty were drawn from the dialogue of the people experiencing poverty rather than the so called “experts” who were attempting to improve the situation of the impoverished.

Empowerment—As a tool of empowerment, the interviews were more effective. One of the purposes of interviewing people in poverty was to begin the “healing process” that needs to ensue before they can move from poverty to prosperity. Part of this healing process involves voicing concerns and experiences that have hurt the individual. The



interviews allowed the informants to talk about their experiences as long as they wanted to talk. Some of the interviews took several hours. As a result, individuals were able to express themselves and to begin the healing process. Another aspect of the healing process includes confronting the persons who have wronged you. P4P represents the regional community and reports to the community. Therefore, the interview process may have served as a tool for empowering the individuals who were interviewed by allowing them to confront the community members and structure that has helped put and keeps them in poverty.

Additionally the interviews need to be mined in order to verify the patterns and themes identified and find solutions to the problems that may have been suggested by the informants. If the information obtained during the interviews is utilized in community development, people in poverty may become empowered politically. However, it is necessary to revisit the interviews perform a more in-depth content analysis in order to reach the level of empowerment that leads to poverty reduction and systemic change.

Challenges

There were several challenges in the application of the ethnographic interviews. The core issue was a lack of time. Because of the need to meet application deadlines, shortcuts were taken in the research method. For example, some problems were experienced in the structure of the interviews, recording of field notes, consistency between interviewers, sampling method, transcription and record keeping. Therefore the information obtained is descriptive in nature since there is no way to ascertain that the same person would have given essentially the same information to a different interviewer or at a different time. In order to overcome this, further interviewing and other field work will need to be conducted to verify the findings of the interviews.

The term “ethnographic interview” implies a specific method of collecting information about a subculture of people. Ethnographic interviewers usually submerge themselves into the culture of the informants and seek to understand the world in which the informant resides through the eyes of the informant. Special attention is paid to the use of words. In order for the interviewer to build trust and to bridge the language gaps between him/herself and the informant, several interviews are usually conducted over a period of time and those interviews are guided interviews. Each interview is designed to get deeper and deeper into the world of the informant and farther and farther away from the experiences of the interviewer. What is produced from this kind of interviewing is an explanation of the experiences of the informant in the voice of the informant.

The problem with conducting one interview with informants is that they may intentionally change the language they use to describe experiences to outsiders giving outsiders an edited version of reality. Therefore, a series of single interviews may or may not get to the heart of the problem. The interviewers had a variety of backgrounds, education and experience. Some of the interviewers took the time to build relationships and trust with those interviewed, some did not. Some of the interviewers were trained in taking field notes, some were not. Some of the interviewers allowed the informants to tell their stories without asking probing questions, some of the interviewers guided the interviews with the questions they asked.



Applicability for Future Research

Although there were some problems with the planning stage interviews, a wealth of information was gained. Between 60 and 80 interviews were gathered that can be mined for additional information. By revisiting the existing interviews and a content analysis the conclusions drawn in the strategic plan concerning the meaning of these interviews can be verified and/or enhanced. If the themes produced by the content analysis are returned to the community of interest through the form of focus group discussions (Community Dialogue Meetings) then some of the potential problems relative to collection, interviewer bias, validity, and reliability may be overcome. Future research efforts, with fewer time restraints, can build on the lessons learned from this initial experience and can produce research information that is very beneficial to P4P and the community at large. It remains important to the goals and mission of P4P to utilize inductive research methods in assessing the community. Interviewing methods that engage the informants in sharing information (ethnographic interviews, or other interviews) should continue to be used in gathering information about poverty and the people of Eastern Idaho.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Another method used to gather information during the planning stage was “Steering Committee Meetings.” The Steering Committee was composed of a fluid, dynamic group of people from across the 16 counties and Fort Hall. It provided a forum for shaping the definition of poverty as well as gathering input on the strategic plan. Over eight hundred people were members of the Steering Committee. Following the planning stage of P4P, the Steering Committee changed names and functions. This body is now known as the Regional Prosperity Task Force (RPTF). The purpose of the Task Force is to help with the implementation of the strategic plan.

Overview of Method

Partners for Prosperity invited participation from citizens across the region on its Steering Committee. Although some people joined the Steering Committee because of newspaper, radio, and television announcements, the most effective method of recruitment was word of mouth and personal invitation. P4P staff members and other Steering Committee members contacted people who might be interested and extended invitations. What emerged was a snowball sampling of people who attended Steering Committee meetings.

Monthly meetings were initially held in various locations throughout the region. Most of the meetings were held in the Blackfoot, Pocatello, and Idaho Falls areas. As the deadline for submission of the strategic plan approached, the frequency of these meetings increased to bi-monthly and sometimes weekly meetings. The Steering Committee worked on ideas for reducing poverty and also functioned as a sounding board for P4P staff members, verifying the conclusions drawn from other research methods. During the Steering Committee meetings, small sub-groups of people discussed specific problems, concerns, and solutions. These “talking circles” were used to allow all who attended an opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns regarding poverty reduction. Professional facilitators were hired to conduct the Steering Committee meetings. The ideas generated from these meetings were collected on poster board sheets and later analyzed to identify themes and issues that would



be addressed in the ten year plan to reduce poverty in the region. Demographic information about the participants in the Steering Committee was also collected at these meetings as well as individual written definitions of poverty and prosperity.

Efficacy

Gathering input from over 800 people over a large geographic area is not usually defined as efficient. Many factors outside of writing the strategic plan could be included in a discussion of efficiency. The location of the meetings, outreach efforts, the meeting discussions, the information gathered, the format of the meetings, the facilitation of the meetings, the talking circles, and the demographic forms could all be evaluated for efficiency. Although some problems were evident, the primary purpose of the Steering Committee was to create a grassroots strategic plan to reduce poverty that would be accepted by the Northwest Area Foundation. Since they accomplished the purpose, the Steering Committee was effective overall.

Empowerment— As a tool of empowerment, the Steering Committee meetings were effective. By using talking circles where individuals are devoid of titles, each person was given equal opportunity to express their ideas and concerns. Those in poverty were heard just as much as those who were not. Talking circles leveled the field and reduced stratification in the region. Because of the empowerment element of the talking circles, this method instigated the model for topic specific working groups that were implemented in the first phase of P4P operation.

Challenges

There were some challenges with the Steering Committee meetings. The most notable challenge centered around who was included in these meetings. Because meetings were held in Pocatello, Idaho Falls, and Blackfoot, participation in those meetings by persons living in remote areas of the region was limited. Although P4P staff made deliberate outreach efforts the farthest rural communities had limited participation. Another challenge centered on the core philosophy of P4P that new people are welcome at any time. This caused the dynamic of the meeting to change frequently due to new members. The core philosophy was also difficult for people who are accustomed to the traditional approach to community meetings.

Applicability for Future Research

The RPTF will continue to be the core of both development and research. They allow people to have input and attempt to level the playing field with the use of talking circles. They also provide a list of people who are willing to help gather information and to be involved with the development efforts. In the future, the RPTF will be used to generate new participation and information as needed. For instance, it is recommended that the RPTF assist in the asset mapping of the community by filling out asset mapping forms and also getting their associates to do the same. Other research efforts may also directly and indirectly utilize the RPTF.



ASSET MAPPING

Overview of Method

Asset Mapping is a strength-based approach to community development work. The purpose is to create a directory and a physical map that can aid in identifying both formal and informal individual, organizational, community, and regional assets that can be used to reduce poverty. P4P hired Area Coordinators and charged them with the task of asset mapping. Area Coordinators gathered information about organizations and businesses in assigned counties. This was to be a type of census of businesses, service agencies and individuals. Regional stakeholders were identified by this method and invited to attend the Steering Committee meetings. Area coordinators gathered information from stakeholders on a form created by the P4P and then submitted the completed forms back to the P4P. P4P staff members were charged with transferring the information gathered into a useable database that could be accessed by community members.

Efficacy

Asset mapping conducted during the planning stage was marginally effective. A contact list of service and other organizations was generated, however due to a number of restraints the asset map and associated database was not completed during the planning stage.

Empowerment—Theoretically, a strength based approach to poverty reduction should be empowering to individuals and communities. Information could be used to link existing service providers with those who need services. It could also be used to attract business to the area and to create coalitions of people seeking to develop small businesses. It could be used in advertising and to attract tourists. Many services could be provided with a map and database.

Challenges

Several key challenges prevented the completion of asset mapping in the entire region. The forms used to gather information from community members were lengthy and cumbersome. Some individuals did not have the time or inclination to complete the forms. Additionally, the forms were modified several times leading to problems with standardization of information. Training was also an issue and therefore area coordinators varied in their effectiveness in completing this process.

During this process it was discovered that other organizations in Idaho were charged with similar initiatives (to map the assets of the state and to develop a database of poverty related services). Because of this, P4P made a decision to partner with these organizations to create a map and database.

Applicability for Future Research

Asset Based Community Development continues to be a key element in reducing poverty in the region. It is anticipated that the asset mapping process will be fine tuned this year and resumed on a smaller, more effective scale.



COMMUNITY DIALOGUE MEETINGS

Overview of Method

The purpose of the ethnographic interviews was to gain the perspective of *individuals* concerning poverty. The purpose of the Steering Committee Meetings was to understand *regional* poverty issues. The purpose of the Community Dialogue Meetings was to learn about *community* specific poverty related issues. These community-based meetings were similar to focus group discussions led by area coordinators and other P4P staff members in communities throughout the region. Approximately 40 meetings were held during the planning stage. Communities were charged with listing and ranking their critical poverty issues. These rankings were used to help P4P members determine the most salient issues and to prioritize community specific and regional issues.

Community dialogue meetings were used as a tool that allowed P4P to look at the community strengths and service gaps at a community level. They also provided a forum for people to become more aware of how poverty affects their community.

Efficacy

Community Dialogue meetings were largely effective in identifying poverty issues. Community members were able to work together in identifying the needs of the community and prioritize the order those needs should be addressed. The efficacy of the meetings depended on the area coordinator that led the discussion and the community members that participated. The discussions were open and the agenda was set by the community members in attendance. Therefore, some of the meetings were more effective in identifying and prioritizing issues than others.

Empowerment—In the short term, community dialogue meetings gave a voice to community members and initiated a true democratic process. Long term feelings of empowerment depend on how successfully P4P implements the suggestions made by the community.

Challenges

The community dialogue meetings shared some of the same challenges of the other planning stage methods. Area coordinators varied in their ability to conduct meetings and there were a few problems in record keeping. There is also a danger in assuming that the participants in these meetings are representative of the community in which they reside which is why further community dialogue meetings are necessary at the local or community specific level.

Applicability for Future Research

The community dialogue meetings will likely serve as a powerful research and development tool. A primary use of the community dialogue format in the upcoming year



will be to verify poverty and prosperity constructs by doing a modified content analysis of the planning stage interviews. By testing these constructs in focus groups, the reliability and the validity of the overall research will be improved.

IDEA FORUM

Overview of Method

The Idea Forum was a tool used by P4P to give voice to individuals who wanted to present a specific remedy for poverty. New ideas were heard by individual members and community members who wanted to pursue their own agenda were able to do so without “hijacking” meetings. Regional residents were invited to present their poverty reduction ideas to a panel consisting of P4P staff and community members. Each idea was evaluated based on the perceived relativity to the grassroots effort that was underway. No idea was eliminated from future discussion however some of the ideas were included in the strategic plan and others were not.

Efficacy

The purpose of the Idea Forum was to empower individuals in the community and to ensure the smooth and efficient operation of Steering Committee and community dialogue meetings by creating a forum to express self interest. This method was effective in handling both concerns.

Empowerment—One of the main objectives of P4P is to empower people living in Eastern Idaho. The Idea Forum could serve to empower individuals by giving them a voice. It could also serve to alienate individuals if they perceive that the purpose of the forum is to pacify them rather than to really consider implementing their ideas. This forum could also give a false sense of power to individuals that would like to halt the progress of P4P.

Challenges

One of the challenges with the Idea Forum was the use of a form that community members were required to fill out. The form asked for short term and long term outcomes of the idea as well as the objective and activities. The purpose was to include some of the ideas in the strategic plan and due to time constraints community members were asked to think their idea through to the objectives, activities and outcomes. However some participants did not want to develop their idea for implementation, instead they wanted to present it and have others develop it. P4P heard every idea, regardless of whether they filled out the forms, however, some community members felt like everyone should have been required to develop their own ideas.

Applicability for Future Research

While some good ideas may emerge from an Idea Forum, P4P could easily incorporate the essentials in the working group structure and in the RPTF meetings. This will continue the grassroots approach to problem solving. It is important to streamline the process



and recognize that some community members prefer a brainstorming role while others prefer to develop ideas more in-depth.

DO NO HARM PANEL

Overview of Method

The final method of gathering qualitative information during the planning stage was the “Do No Harm (dialectic) Panel.” A panel of community members selected from the Steering Committee evaluated the ten year strategic plan before it was submitted to the Northwest Area Foundation to ensure that the strategies and activities did not harm regional communities and individuals or surrounding areas as in poverty transfer.

Efficacy

The panel was limited due to time constraints. However, the things they identified as being unintended consequences were very important to the formulation of the final plan. Much of the strength of the strategic plan can be traced back to the feedback from this panel.

Empowerment—The panel also served to empower community members. The plan could not be submitted without a final check by this panel. Additionally, the recommendations of this panel were heeded.

Challenges

As with the other methods, time constraints were a problem for this panel.

Applicability for Future Research

Because of the positive impact this panel had on the strategic plan, it is recommended that a similar panel review each phase of the strategic plan prior to the approval by the Northwest Area Foundation. This would serve to empower community members; keep the RPTF fully informed of the activities and practices of P4P; and would ensure that the “do no harm” principle continues to be part of the P4P philosophy.

SUMMARY

The qualitative methods of information gathering used during the planning stage uncovered individual, community, and regional definitions of poverty and prioritized the activities of P4P. Although a number of challenges occurred in the process of obtaining this information, the variety of research methods utilized served to offset some of the problems. Despite these challenges, the information gathered came from diverse sources and is ground truthed to the people in the region--it “rings true”. Future research should build upon the methodological lessons learned in the planning stage.