Community Economic Development

Roles for Practitioners and Educator: The Technical Assistance Approach

From a broad perspective the *Technical Assistance* approach assumes that the community is well defined, has well-functioning local institutions, the community has identified a problem or goal, and is moving toward a plan of action. Here the practitioner supports task-oriented actions. For example, the community has identified a federal funding opportunity for a specific community strategy and requires assistance in completing the grant application. Alternatively, the community has decided that they wish to improve the water quality of a lake associated with a community park. Here they may require assistance in developing engineering plans and establishing cost estimates. The role of the practitioner is well defined: aiding with policy implementation.

If the practitioner is working toward policy development (developing a plan of action or set of strategies) the practitioner uses the *scientific method* to identify strengths and weaknesses of the community. These analyses are then used to help formulate policy by bringing research-based information into the community decision making process. Alternatively, if policy goals are identified the practitioner uses the scientific method to identify strategies that are most effective at achieving those goals. Here involving a wide representation of the community in a decision-making making process becomes secondary to the technical analysis and resulting policy outcomes.

In a sense, the practitioner or educator becomes a consultant who has been asked to address a specific aspect issue facing the community. The consultant gathers the relevant information, applies the appropriate analytical tools, and develops recommendations and strategies for implantation. The practitioner is asked a specific question that requires a technically correct answer.

Advantages of the technical assistance approach include: change can be rapid; it works in any size community; it is task driven (easier to "sink your teeth" into it); and that decisions are based on research-based information. Also, from a fun-

der's perspective, the "action" is clear and easily documented. Disadvantages of the technical assistance approach are: it can give the illusion of finality of the process; that the process may be lost to task accomplishment; that it often loses the *holistic* view; and that it presumes the practitioner has, or can obtain, the necessary technical skills.

If the overarching goal of community economic development within a university extension setting is to "help communities make more informed decisions" then the technical assistance approach emphasizes the information upon which decisions are based. Alternatively, if we recast this discussion within the process versus content framework the technical assistance favors the content side. This is not to say that there are no scientific methods to facilitating the decision-making process. Rather, the focus of the work of the practitioner or educator is on making sure that research-based information is at the forefront and providing solid technical analysis.

The key "take away" from the technical assistance approach is that research-based information matters to community economic development. Within a university extension setting programming is education focused which means advancing the community's understanding and thinking about community economic development. This requires a better understanding of the local economy and strategies that can affect the local economy. Perhaps more important when a community asks a technical question that creates a "teachable moment." The educator can respond to a technical question or request with a technical answer, or the educator can take the opportunity to build an educational program.

An example might be responding to a request to help secure state or federal grant funding for a specific project the community wants to undertake. The practitioner could simple write the grant or the educator could work with community staff or volunteers to build their capacity to complete these grants applications on their own. Another example can be economic impact assessment. An educator could be asked what the economic impact of some scenario might be and the educator could provide a technical response to this technical question and be done. Alternative, the economic impact assessment could be used to start a broader community discussion about the scenario under consideration. In the end the practitioner or educator must make judgment calls about the proper balance between the process and content of their community programming.

Author: Steven Deller, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, University of Wisconsin—Madison/Extension