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A typical focus group is built around asking people to answer questions. From a transformative perspective, it may be fruitful to engage in guided discussion instead of posing and answering questions. This paper presents a rationale for facilitating group and individual discussions.

We think that if we ask the right questions, if we listen carefully, and if we apply our knowledge and experience diligently to what we hear; we will learn what is real. But is this the way to seek God and what God is doing in that setting?

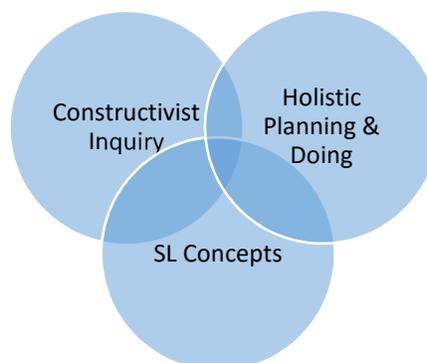
Spiritual Landscape Assessment focus

The focus for SLA is discovering, from a kingdom perspective, the dominant values of the different groups in the community that influence how people relate with each other and institutions. More specifically, it is discovering:

- Spiritual needs to be addressed in the setting and people involved to enhance facilitation of transformational development for child well-being.
- Assets in the setting and people involved that can be applied to address the priority needs.
- Strengths and weaknesses in the lead implementing agency for using assets to address those needs. In particular, the exercise over time should enable development facilitators in communities to discover their own spiritual gifts along with personal needs and limitations in understanding and appreciating the many aspects of spirituality influencing living in the communities.

We can view SL assessment first as an invitation to understand each other's views of spirituality and religion. As mutual understanding grows, discussion participants may discover a common will to improve their context in ways that nurture spiritual development. At that point activities to create an informative framework to guide action can be introduced.

Spiritual lens for working with assessment data



Become aware of how science epistemology can create obstacles to understanding Transformational Development. Cause-effect relationships in the physical world are the essence of science, while loving God and neighbor as guided by kingdom values are the essence of TD. A spiritual lens for doing assessment is based on blending principles of constructivist inquiry with principles of holistic thinking. Such a lens is not hindered by cause-effect thinking, which allows the inquiry to focus on God's activity in the setting and the lives of those connected to the setting.

Constructivist principles

The primary objective of the constructivist approach to assessment is

- to enable groups of stakeholders
- to create constructions/descriptions of features of the context
- that are most relevant to their claims, concerns and issues.

The goal of the assessment leader is not to identify elements of the spiritual landscape. The goal is to facilitate stakeholders as they develop descriptions of spiritual elements that are important to them. There is no best construction. The assessment leader conducts one-one discussions within a group of stakeholders to identify the range of descriptions, gradually formulating a description or conflicting descriptions for that group. This process is completed for each group of stakeholders.

In a second round of discussions the leader identifies the salient features of the emerging description or descriptions. Descriptions from other groups are introduced for critique. As the inquiry proceeds outside input can be introduced into the discussions to be critiqued. Eventually there will be a list of features with broad consensus, and a list of others where there is not consensus.

Where there is not consensus the assessor or assessment team conducts a detailed examination of high priority claims, concerns and issues.

- Claims are statements that are assumed to be true until evidence is analyzed that shows they are at least partially not true.
- Concerns are features in the setting that cause anxiety. In an assessment activities are done to identify factors causing anxiety and what can be done to manage them.
- Issues are features in the setting about which there is disagreement of some sort. In an assessment evidence is sought that people agree will illuminate issues so that they do not impede moving forward in a constructive manner.

Holistic principles

- The assessment team continually reflects on implications of Scripture for the assessment exercise. As appropriate, others can be encouraged to do so.
- Watch for information on relationships that enhance individual and social transformation.
- Keep the bigger picture in mind, the theory of transformational change, throughout the exercise.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to lead the process, and follow the guidance provided.
- Practice spiritual disciplines, especially prayer and fasting,

Discussions or interviews?

A humble attitude is essential for following Jesus in all our living. A humble attitude is essential for using a spiritual lens to collect and analyze information about a spiritual landscape. Group discussion is more consistent with using a spiritual lens than focus group questions.