

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A 10-STEP APPROACH

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DEDICATION

To my beloved son, *Zuriel Uchechukwu Chris-Chukwunyere*.

In 2023, as I began documenting this book, your passing, my precious boy, stopped me in my tracks. For over a year, I struggled to find the strength to write again. Each word carried the weight of my grief. Yet, I found a renewed purpose in the depths of that pain. Your memory has become my unwavering motivation, driving me to finish what we began together.

This book is dedicated to you. Your love, light, and spirit inspire me daily to create solutions that will improve health outcomes and bring meaningful change to the world.

I love you, my son. Always and forever.



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PREFACE

With a population of over 220 million people, Nigeria is one of the most vibrant and diverse nations in the world. A staggering 70 percent of this population is under the age of 30, putting young people in a unique position as the majority and, I daresay, the powerhouse of transformation. They are energetic, innovative, and resilient, qualities that position them as drivers of sustainable change. With over fifteen years of experience as a public health practitioner and researcher, I started as a young person in this field. I recall the passion and exuberance with which I pursued change. This background and experience helped me relate easily and work closely with young people to unlock their immense potential, create solutions to address health challenges, and spark long-term community development.

In 2023, as an Information Futures Fellow with Brown University School of Public Health, I embarked on a journey to assess health needs across 40 communities in Nigeria. My mission was clear: understanding the prevalent diseases and health information gaps hindering communities from achieving

optimal health outcomes. I realized that lasting change would be impossible without the active participation of the youth, the people most driven to transform their communities.

Engaging young people in development is crucial for fostering sustainable and inclusive progress. Their vibrancy and eagerness for change form a powerful reservoir of potential energy that, when skillfully guided, can be channeled into a deep understanding of community challenges and the “birth” of innovative solutions. Youth-led approaches, recognized by many global development organizations, emphasize the unique perspectives, digital fluency, and creative insights that only the next generation can bring. By empowering them with the knowledge and skills they need to fully understand the problem and harness their natural drive for change, we unlock a transformative force that can elicit more impactful and equitable outcomes.

This is why I chose a youth-led approach for the health needs assessment: to amplify young people's voices, equip them with the necessary skills, and enable them to drive change from the ground up. For the Information Futures Lab, I worked with 40 young community influencers spread across semi-urban and rural communities in Nasarawa, Plateau, Edo, Bauchi, Adamawa, Taraba, Delta States, and Abuja the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria. These young individuals were not just data collectors; they were change agents, leaders, and innovators. Together, we engaged community stakeholders, carefully analyzing the data and insights we gathered to identify the health gaps that required urgent attention. Then we co-created innovative solutions tailored to the unique needs of each community.

That is how this 10-step approach was born. This book is more than a guide; it is a testament to the boundless potential of youth leadership in shaping a healthier and more resilient future. As I reflect on my journey, I am reminded that young people are not just the leaders of tomorrow, they are today's leaders, capable of driving change in their communities when given the tools, resources, and support they need.

In the pages ahead, I share the step-by-step approach I used to implement a youth-led community health needs assessment across Nigeria and the stories behind each engagement, process, and step that culminated in this 10-step approach. Whether you are a healthcare professional, community leader, researcher, practitioner, or policymaker, this guide will show you how to engage young people in meaningful ways, conduct thorough youth-driven health needs assessments, and develop local solutions that address health challenges effectively.

By the end of this book, you will have a comprehensive understanding of the youth-led approach to conducting community health needs assessments and the tools, strategies, and insights you need to create a lasting impact in your community. The youth are ready to lead, this book will help you unlock their full potential and transform your community's health outcomes.



INTRODUCTION

A community health needs assessment is a powerful tool for understanding the health challenges, behaviors, and needs of a population. When done right, it provides invaluable insights that can guide decision-makers in developing targeted interventions, allocating resources, and ultimately improving the health and well-being of the people they serve.

At its core, a community health needs assessment is about listening, going beyond literature and surface-level statistics to understand the voices of the people within a community. It's about uncovering hidden health disparities, gaps in resources, and areas where change is needed most. By collecting and analyzing data on a community's health status, we can identify the most pressing health concerns and develop effective strategies to address them.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

defines a community health needs assessment as a process that provides community leaders with a snapshot of local health policies, systems, and environmental changes. It also helps identify areas that need improvement. Armed with this information, communities are empowered to create strategies that lead to lasting, positive change. It is a chance to map out a clear course for health improvement, ensuring that no community is left behind.

This type of assessment goes beyond identifying issues. It brings diverse stakeholders, community members, healthcare providers, local organizations, and policymakers, together to work collaboratively toward a shared goal. The data collected serves as a compass, guiding communities toward practical, sustainable interventions that make a real difference in people's lives.

IMPORTANCE OF CONDUCTING A COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In the past, many intervention projects were designed, implemented, and evaluated without first conducting a community health needs assessment. This is akin to prescribing medication without a proper diagnosis. This approach is ineffective and can waste valuable resources and time. Before any solution is proposed, it is crucial to understand the real issues facing the target community. Conducting a needs assessment ensures that interventions are based on accurate, data-driven insights into the community's specific health needs.

The process of conducting a community health needs assessment is methodical, deliberate, and deeply rooted in

community engagement. It is a cycle of gathering information and analyzing data, but mostly about listening to the voices of those who know the community best. The beauty of this process is that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it is tailored to each community's unique needs and characteristics. Whether through surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, or community forums, the community health needs assessment allows a community to take an active role in shaping its health. By accurately diagnosing the underlying challenges, we can design more relevant and effective solutions that address the actual problems, ensuring better outcomes and sustainable impact.

Ultimately, community health needs assessments should result in changes in policy, the environment, and social norms.

WHAT A COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT DOES

Identifies Community Strengths And Challenges

Reveals challenges, gaps, and possible areas for improvement. Identifies a community's strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities for and threats to improvement.

Ensures Community Engagement And Collaboration

Builds relationships, fosters trust, and enhances participation and collective action by community leaders, members, and organizations.

Informs Program Development

The information gathered during a community health needs assessment can help provide strategic direction for community

development projects, ensuring solutions to actual rather than perceived problems.

Aids Resource Prioritization

Helps identify the most pressing needs that require immediate attention. Provides strategic direction, ensuring that resources are devoted to the most urgent needs.

Helps Evaluate The Effectiveness Of Existing Programs

Can analyze program effectiveness and identify gaps in services or initiatives. May provide justification for scale-up or course correction.

Promotes Equity and Inclusivity

All community voices and perspectives are represented and considered during decision-making. Ensures that resources are distributed justly and fairly. (It is crucial that the sample size used in an assessment accurately captures the perspectives of the entire community.)

IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF ASSESSMENT

*We don't know why.
Maybe it's the water,
maybe something else.*

”

S T E P

01

Listen, Learn, Connect

The sun was just beginning to rise when I first stepped into Dnapakwo, a rural community nestled on the outskirts of Nasarawa State. Bustling with early morning activities, the small homes lining the dirt road on each side told a story of resilience. Amina, a mother of four, sat in her front yard preparing breakfast for her family. Her eldest child picked up a bucket and a scarf and took the other children to the local stream to fetch water for the household.

My purpose was clear: uncover the prevalent health issues in Dnapakwo, understand how these challenges shaped people's health behaviors, and figure out what kind of health information would make a real difference. But as I stood in the town square, watching children play with makeshift toys and women selling fresh produce from their farms, I realized the enormity of the task ahead.

I began my quest by speaking with the community leaders. "Our children often fall sick," one elder told me, his voice laced with frustration. "We don't know why. Maybe it's the water, maybe something else." This became my



starting point, uncovering the connection between frequent illnesses and people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

Amina's story stood out to me. We met her at the corner of the town square, under the shade of a large tree, her youngest child strapped to her back. She explained how she had nearly lost two of her children to severe episodes of diarrhea after drinking water from the stream. She didn't know about boiling water or other safe water treatment methods. As I listened to her story, my heart broke, knowing that two things could solve her ordeal: knowledge and access to safe drinking water.

This experience taught me that a successful health needs assessment isn't just about collecting data, it's about listening, learning, and connecting with people to understand their realities and then working with them to create lasting change.

When I first decided to conduct a community health needs assessment, my sights were set on COVID-19 and vaccine uptake in Nigeria. It seemed like the most pressing issue at the time, but something didn't sit quite right. As I mulled over my scope for the project, I found myself grappling with a nagging question: Is this what matters most for the communities I aim to serve?

Seeking clarity, I began reaching out to colleagues, mentors, and trusted peers. Each conversation added a new layer to my understanding and helped me peel back the surface of what I was trying to achieve. During a particularly enlightening discussion, one colleague asked me, “What’s the real problem you want to solve? What’s the heartbeat of your work?”

That question stayed with me. It led me to reflect deeply on the needs of the communities I hoped to impact. It became clear that while COVID-19 and vaccine uptake were urgent, there were other health issues in these communities that had been ignored for far too long. Diseases like malaria, diarrhea, diabetes, hypertension, and maternal health complications were ravaging lives, not because people didn’t want to prevent and manage them, but because they lacked access to relevant and culturally acceptable health information.

This realization was a turning point. I redefined my purpose, narrowing my focus to understanding the health information needs in target communities. Pivoting away from the original idea wasn’t an easy decision, but it was the right one.

Here’s what I learned from my experience:

Clarity of Purpose

Focusing on a specific topic brought everything into sharper focus. Once I decided on prevalent diseases and health information needs, it became easier to identify the goals and objectives of the assessment. It became easy to say, “This is what I’m working on, and this is why it matters.” That clarity guided every decision and action, ensuring that my efforts aligned with a meaningful purpose.

Efficient Use of Resources

Resources were limited, as they often are with community projects. The temptation to address multiple issues at once was strong, but I realized that spreading myself too thin would dilute the impact. With a specific focus, I was able to channel my time, energy, and funds into an assessment that truly mattered. Every tool I developed and every conversation I had were intentional and helped save resources that could have otherwise been wasted.

Targeted Interventions

Specificity not only streamlined the assessment but also shaped the subsequent interventions. For instance, after identifying waterborne diseases as a major issue in one community, we created educational materials on water purification tailored to their cultural context. Such targeted interventions have the potential for measurable impact because they address a specific, well-defined problem.

Trends Identification

Focusing on a single topic allowed me to uncover patterns and trends that might have gone unnoticed in a broader study. For example, I discovered a link between low vaccination rates and misinformation about side effects. This insight not only informed the interventions we designed but also helped us anticipate future challenges.

Community Engagement

One of the most rewarding aspects of my experience was the engagement it fostered within the communities. The specificity

IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE ASSESSMENT

of our focus made it easier for community members to connect with the questions we asked during interviews. I remember sitting by a well in one village as mothers candidly shared their struggles with accessing reliable health information. Their openness wasn't just a result of the trust we had built, it was because our questions resonated with their lived experiences.

Looking back, the decision to redefine my project wasn't just a step in the process; it was the foundation of its success. That's the power of clarity, consultation, and a commitment to making an impact where it counts. It's not about casting the widest net; it's about digging deep where it matters most.



Health education session with over 300 women during a community outreach in Mararaba, Nasarawa State, Nigeria.

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT



Community health outreach in Mararaba, Nasarawa State, Nigeria.

