

What are “Needs”?¹

Needs Analysis can be a nightmare! We are commonly told that programs are developed in response to *needs*. But, how can we determine the *needs* of a particular target group?

Philosophers have debated issues of the *needs*, *rights* and *wants* of human beings for centuries. It is unlikely that we will reach a simple conclusion as to what the *true needs* of a given target group of people are, in our lifetime. It is important, however, to come up with a *working conclusion*, if we are to advocate for and with disadvantaged community members.

It is critical, from the outset, to recognise that ***needs are not simply a fixed entity which has to be identified. They are a matter of values and interpretation.*** The *working conclusion* we each develop and work from will directly reflect our personal or organisational values.

The following is a rough compilation of 4 different concepts. Whilst each is quite discrete, they are not mutually exclusive. It is quite possible to *cut and paste* from these and develop your own composite concept.

Concept 1: *Rights, Needs and Wants are Different Things*

This concept is probably the most widely assumed. It describes the common understanding of *rights*, *needs* and *wants*.

(Human) *rights* are:

- Universal – applying to every human being, regardless of circumstance.
- A non-negotiable/absolute entitlement.
- Predetermined.
- Unconditional.

The most commonly quoted statement of human rights is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the United Nations in 1948. However, there are many other views on what constitute *human rights*. Working from the assumption that people have basic human rights tends to be proactive.

(Human) *needs* are:

- Contextual – particular to each situation or person.

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- Varying - not fixed; often nebulous.
- A matter of judgment – usually, the perception of the person identifying the *needs*.
- Focused on individuals.
- Central to ability to someone's ability to function individually or socially.

Working on the basis of people's needs is generally responsive (when collective needs are identified) or reactive (where individual needs are focused on).

(Human) wants are:

Wants are similar to *needs*, except that:

- They are concerned with preference/desires.
- The judgment/views on which they're based are usually those of each individual experiencing the *wants*.
- They are not central to someone's ability to function individually or socially.

Working on the basis of people's wants is generally reactive.

Concept 2: Comparing Sociological and Psychological Perspectives²

Rob White has suggested that there are four different views of what people *need* being applied to youth in Australia³. This theory could readily be transferred to other minority or disadvantaged groups, because their members are typically treated as *children*.

- 1. Universal Needs** - This is the idea that every human has the same basic *needs*. Young people, for example, are no different to anyone else in this. Equally, these needs are seen to be universal. This means they apply in all cultures and societies. Often the people who see *needs* in this way, also see them as *rights*. Anything more than these *needs* are *wants*.
- 2. Conditioned Needs** - This is the idea that our perception of what we need comes from our history and cultural assumptions. In western society, the *conditioned needs* view of youth is based on theories about *adolescent development*⁴. They are tied to the belief that young people are going through a transition stage in their life, and therefore have *special needs*.
- 3. Limited Needs** - This is tied to the idea of *conditioned needs*. It is the idea that *young people* need **less** than *adults* because of the stage of life they are in. This concept is commonly supported by groups such as governments and some trades unions who, for example, see young people as needing lower Social Security benefits or lower wages than *adults*.

² This concept is reproduced from a distance learning package produced for the Aboriginal Study Centre Program, DeTAFE-SA, Pt Augusta, entitled *Understanding Young People* - a unit of the Advanced Certificate in Community Services (Youth Specialisation) by Suzi Quixley. It is a summary of an article:

▪ White, Rob (1987) *Youth Workers: Training for What?* in **Youth Studies Bulletin**, Hobart, Tasmania.

³ *ibid*:24

⁴ Note that the concept of a stage in life called *youth* or *adolescence* is a recent Western **theory**.

4. **Structural Needs** - This is the idea that different groups in society have different needs. It is based on the concept that some groups (e.g. Aboriginal people, young people, people with disabilities, women) are structurally disadvantaged. (This means that **as a whole group** they start off with less of their needs met, and therefore miss out compared with other groups in the society.) In a way, this goes back to the idea of *human/universal needs* rather than *youth needs* or *Aboriginal needs* or *women's needs*. It says that the main needs of young people are the needs of the social group that they are a part of. If they are Aboriginal, then most of their needs are the same as other Aboriginal people. The needs of Aboriginal people are different to the needs of other Australians, because of their history of oppression. This view says that white, middle class young men generally experience very few *special needs* just because they are young ... they experience most of the structural advantages of white, middle class men in western society.

Clearly, workers preferring the more sociological concepts (*Universal* and *Structural Needs*) are likely to identify youth *needs* as things like:

- Adequate income.
- Appropriate housing.
- Structural changes to employment.
- Changes in laws affecting the status of young people.
- Dealing with discrimination, etc.

Workers preferring the more psychological concepts (*Conditioned* and *Limited Needs*) will tend to identify *needs* in areas like:

- Love.
- Protection.
- Counselling.
- Behavioural learning.
- New services, etc.

Concept 3: A More Individualistic Perspective on Needs⁵

This approach argues that one way to ensure that you have a reasonably comprehensive analysis of a particular group's *needs* is to draw on four different areas of advice:

1. **Normative Need** - The specialist idea of *need*, based on the *expert's* assessment of the needs of a particular group. The people considered *expert* would vary from

⁵ This concept draws heavily on the following:

- Cronin, Bernie (1987) **Roads, Rates and Rock'n'Roll: Planning Local Services for and with Young People**, Municipal Association of Victoria, Melbourne.
- Quixley, Suzi (1990) **Research for Planning Youth Programs: A Resource Kit for SkillShare Projects**, Youth Sector Training Council of SA, Adelaide
- Watson, David (ed) (1985) **A Code of Ethics for Social Work: The Second Step**, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

situation to situation. For example, the parents of children with Downs Syndrome could fit this definition where programs for those with the Syndrome are being developed; youth workers might be experts when it comes to programming in the youth field. This notion of need is not restricted to researchers or other academics - generally, they do not meet the criteria for expertise within this context!

2. **Felt Need** - What members of your target group say **when asked** what they *need*. This is likely to vary enormously from person to person, according to their experience, background, preferences, personality, and so on. It is generally important to recognise that members of any target group are not a *homogenous mass* with identical (or, sometimes even, related) needs.
3. **Expressed Need** - Essentially, this view of *need* is concerned with what the target group's behaviour *says* about what they need. It can be viewed in two related ways. One analysis states *need is defined by the number and behaviour of people using, not using, or demanding a service*⁶. That is, people may express the needs they feel most strongly by their actions, rather than words. They may not even be conscious of these needs when asked. Watson, another writer, views this area more broadly⁷. He sees it as the perception of need being actively stated or acted on at the target group's own initiative. For example, illegal graffiti artists might be saying something about their interest in art, their view of the city's architecture, their need for public recognition or a myriad of other interpretations. Elderly people, protesting on the steps of Parliament House are likely to be more explicit about exactly what they perceive as their needs!
4. **Comparative Need** - A definition of *need* derived by comparing one target group with another, where there are some similar or related characteristics. For example, some of the experience of social isolation documented in relation to physically disabled people might equally apply to single middle aged unemployed men living in boarding houses. Or, more simply, the needs of inmates in one prison might be similar to those of inmates in another prison.

Essentially, this approach argues that if you get a balance of input from the four sources, you will have a pretty comprehensive idea of what a given group actually *need*.

This approach could be pursued in the wider context of either of the earlier concepts:

Example: You could believe that everyone has inalienable human rights, and use this more individualistic concept to get advice on whether these are being met in the case of a particular target group.

⁶ Cronin 1987:9

⁷ Watson 1985:11

Concept 4: Moving Beyond Western Constructs

Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean writer also known as *The Barefoot Economist*, has developed a practical model of human needs⁸. According to Max-Neef, existing notions of *human rights* are essentially Western. He argues that a new, more sophisticated theory is required to suit the Third World.

He deliberately does not engage with the question of whether there are any such things as *absolute human rights*. He sees most interventions as interrelated, and having multiple effects - meeting one need may undermine or enhance another. His theory was initially designed as a practical tool for assessing the merits of international aid programs, but can be readily transferred to needs analysis in a wide range of contexts. The schema can be a useful tool for diagnosing the possible effects of an intervention in a community ... or your own life.

Max-Neef identified 9 fundamental human needs - Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Participation, Idleness, Creation, Identity and Freedom⁹. He detailed the indicators of each of these needs being met - at an individual and social level, and then explored attempts designed (supposedly) to satisfy these needs in a number of different First and Third World countries.

Max-Neef concluded that *satisfiers* have functioned in a variety of ways¹⁰:

- **Violators or Destroyers** - are applied under the pretext of satisfying a given need¹¹. Not only do they fail to meet the designated need, but they also make it impossible to meet other needs.

Example 1: The arms race is supposedly designed to provide Protection, but in the process it impairs any capacity to meet Subsistence, Affection, Participation or Freedom needs.

Example 2: Bureaucracy, too, supposedly meets Protection needs, but actually undermines Understanding, Affection, Participation, Creation, Identity and Freedom needs.

- **Pseudo-Satisfiers** - are where an issue may, at first glance, seem to satisfy a need. In fact, it gives a false sense of satisfaction.

Examples: Exploitation of the natural environment seemingly satisfies Subsistence needs; fashions and fads seemingly meet the need for Identity.

⁸ See Max-Neef, Manfred A. (1991) **Human Scale Development: Conception, Application and Further Reflections**, The Apex Press, New York. (Depending upon whether it's in print at the time, available in Australia through Urban Ecology Australia Inc. ph/fax: (08) 8232 4866.) Given the frequent difficulty of purchasing this book, a more detailed summary of Max-Neef's theory is available from ESSQ.

⁹ *ibid*:32-33

¹⁰ *ibid*:32-36

¹¹ *ibid*:33

- **Inhibiting Satisfiers** - are actions that, whilst meeting one need, inhibit the meeting of multiple needs.

Example 1: Commercial television, whilst meeting a need for Idleness, also inhibits Understanding, Creation and Identity.

Example 2: Unlimited permissiveness, whilst meeting a need for Freedom, also inhibits Protection, Affection, Identity and Participation.

- **Singular Satisfiers** - are actions that meet a single need.

Examples: Food and housing programs meet the need for subsistence; insurance systems meet the need for Protection; nationality meets the need for Identity.

- **Synergic Satisfiers** - are actions which in meeting one need stimulate and contribute to the simultaneous satisfaction of other needs:

Example 1: Breast feeding meets an immediate Subsistence need, but also contributes to meeting Protection, Affection and Identity needs.

Example 2: Democratic trade unions meet a need for Protection, but also contribute to meeting Understanding, Participation and Identity needs.

Example 3: Meditation meets a need for Understanding, but also enhances Idleness, Creation and Identity.

Max-Neef argues the importance of developing strategies to meet human needs that address as many needs as possible. An implicit part of *Needs Analysis* involves analysing the possible consequences of ideas for intervention ... and at the very least, ensuring that you meet a single need (rather than the illusion of addressing a need), and aiming to develop *Synergic Satisfiers* wherever possible.