

Guide to Activity List, a Tiny Tool

Version 1.3

www.ngo-ideas.net

INTRODUCTION

NGO-IDEAS develops tools for communities and NGOs to measure change and understand what contributed to change. Some tools are described in the Impact Toolbox. Other tools for communities to reflect on change around them are collected in “Tiny Tools - An Overview”. They are all handy and relatively easy to apply. One of these Tiny Tools is the Activity List. More about NGO-IDEAS and its tools: www.ngo-ideas.net. NGO-IDEAS would appreciate feedback and suggestions for improvements. Please contact Bernward Causemann (bc@causemann.org) or Eberhard Gohl (gohl@impact-plus.de).

Our Vision for Activity Lists

Communities assess how development projects influenced their lives. Through structured reflection with tools like this, they

- realise what interventions were of greatest relevance,
- come to understand what changed and how they contributed to it,
- become aware of how they can influence developments, and act on it.

This happens initially with the facilitation from NGOs or other outsiders. This process also provides NGOs or other development organisations with a better understanding of the dynamics and priorities in a community.

A. PURPOSE OF THE ACTIVITY LIST

The Activity List allows a community to compare different project interventions and activities in a systematic way in terms of importance as well as their relative cost-benefit ratio. Interventions by different NGOs or agencies can be assessed in one tool. Community members can draw conclusions regarding the significance and sustainability of the operations.

B. WHEN TO USE ACTIVITY LISTS

There are many possible situations when to use an Activity List whenever there is a community that is prepared to reflect on its situation:

- ✓ when there is a need to (re-) consider development efforts in the community,
- ✓ when the development organisation wants to introduce other tools for monitoring change, to open up the community and staff for looking at change,
- ✓ for an evaluation or impact study,
- ✓ to know more about the effects of specific development work.

Links and References

Neubert Susanne 2010: Description and Examples of MAPP. Method for Impact Assessment of Programmes and Projects, DIE, Lusaka 2010, www.ngo-ideas.net/MAPP/

C. REQUIREMENTS: THIS IS WHAT I NEED

- ✓ **Participants:** About 15-25, either an existing group or a cross-section of a community. If the group is bigger it will take more time, but that is also possible. If the group is smaller, we might have more engagement but run the risk that important sections of the community are not present and cannot bring in their views.
- ✓ **Material:** Either a flipchart / big paper and markers, or sand / soil to draw a graph on.
- ✓ **Trust:** The NGO should be familiar with the area and have good relations with the stakeholders. The chosen group should be an entity, a community, for example representatives from a village.
- ✓ **Facilitation skills and attitude:** The NGO staff needs knowledge and skills in facilitation and application of PRA tools; they especially need to be trained in Activity List. They need to have an intention to help the community really understand the change and believe in empowering people.
- ✓ **Time:** One to two hours, for the 8 steps, not counting preparation.
- ✓ **Follow-up:** At least a small project activity should result after this exercise. Funds have to be allocated for this if the exercise is not part of an on-going development work.

D. HOW TO DO IT**Step 1 Introduce the tool**

Explain the purpose of the exercise to the group or community members present. It is important that participants understand: The Activity List is used to deepen their understanding; they do not participate only to provide the NGO staff with information.

Step 2 Create a chart

Create a chart on paper or on the ground so that everybody can see it (see example). In the first (left) column, list project activities. Ask people what project activities or interventions they experienced in the village. If some are not mentioned that you are interested in, you can ask them whether they are relevant enough to be added. In the second column, list all the donor and partner organisations active in the community.

Step 3 Evaluate the relevance and importance of each activity

Let the workshop participants rate all of the activities according to their day-to-day relevance and importance for the everyday life of the community. To rate the activities use a scale that has five points with assessment ratings ranging from "very important" (●●●●) to "no importance" (●). Ask: Did any activity have a negative influence? Take notes of the reasons people give for their ratings, here and in the following steps. You may need a note-taker.

Step 4 Identify the main beneficiaries

After having rated the activities according to their importance for the community, the participants identify and list those parts of the population benefiting from each of the activities.

Step 5 Evaluate the required expenditure of labour and financial resources

The participants discuss and evaluate the amount of work they have spent for the implementation and maintenance of each of the activities from “we have contributed a lot of labour” (●●●●) to “we have not contributed any labour” (●). Financial inputs and contributions may also be included in the list.

Step 6 Interpret the results

When the chart is completed, discuss the overall interpretation of the Activity List. Document the different opinions on the flipchart or in the minutes. When using big sheets of paper, or a flipchart, the comments or explanations can usually be written behind the respective activities. You may start by asking a community member to summarise what the chart shows. Afterwards the participants can discuss the following questions:

- How can change be attributed to different activities and actors?
- To what extent have the efforts been worth the benefits?
- Who are the main beneficiaries? Are there parts of the population who benefit more than others?
- Will these activities or benefits be sustained in future?

Step 7 Participatory Development Planning

Discuss with the group members:

What lessons can be drawn from the Activity List?

What action would they like to take? What do they want to do in the short term to bring about more change? What do they want to achieve in the mid-term?

Finally: Ask for feedback on the methodology: Was the exercise useful? Would they recommend it to others? Could you do this exercise yourselves?

Step 8 Evaluate on the NGO level

After leaving the community, discuss among the NGO staff: a) What lessons do you draw from the exercise? b) What would you do differently next time? c) What immediate action should you take? d) What should change in the mid-term in your work with this community (or other communities)?

E. EXAMPLE

The example below is an Activity List for a village in West Africa where different organisations implemented a number of different development activities. These have been rated by community members regarding their importance, that is for their benefit for their daily lives, as well as the required expenditure of labour. The community also included a column to show whether women or men benefited mostly from the respective activities.

It can be seen that the health station and the school were rated highest in importance while other activities, such as “irrigated rice growing” had the highest demand on their labour.

Table: Activity list for Kalé

Activity	Organization	Importance for daily life	Beneficiary group ^a	Labour expended
Health station	OO ^b	•••••	M + W	•••
School	OO	•••••	M + W	•••
Nature reserves	PGRN	••••	M	•
Anti-erosion contour stone-lines	PGRN	••••	M	•••••
Composting facilities organic manuring	PGRN	••••	M	••••
Grain bank	PGRN	••••	M + W	•••
Wether fattening	PGRN	•••	M + W	••
Village savings bank	OO (?)	•••	M + W	••
Irrigated rice growing	PGRN	•••	M + W	•••••
Irrigation plant	PGRN	•••	W	•••••
Pump for well	OO	••	M + W	•
Tree plantations	PGRN	•	M	••
Bee-keeping	PGRN	•	M	•

a Where socio-professional groups are concerned, almost all the users are farmers.
 b Other Organizations

Key: ••••• = very important / very considerable expenditure of labour Women (W), Men (M)
 •••• = important / considerable expenditure of labour
 ••• = fairly important / medium expenditure of labour
 •• = little importance / little expenditure of labour
 • = no importance / no expenditure of labour

Source: Susanne Neubert, MAPP - A New Method for Impact Assessment of Poverty Alleviation Projects, Bonn 1999

F. PRACTICAL HINTS

- ✓ If people disagree on how to rate a specific activity: We need to help the community to find out the reasons. Maybe someone says that the activity was relevant for the community but for him/her it was not so important. Then it will be possible to agree on an assessment for the majority. It is helpful to document the different arguments. – Maybe developments have been different for different groups: Some have benefited from the new road, others live too far away to profit. Or the year was better for men or for women, for fishermen or for agriculturalists. In that case we can give two values and note the reasons for the differences.
- ✓ It is possible to give values like 3.5 or 4.5 if the participants want to.
- ✓ It is quite a challenge to do this exercise with the whole community. But if the participants are selected by the community, this could build trust and ensure a broad representation.
- ✓ Keep the chart, or a photo, as a reference for the next exercise. Note the names of those who participated.

G. ALTERNATIVES/VARIATIONS

There are many possible variations. More or less columns may be included in the table if necessary. Steps 4 or 5 can be left out. It is possible to note other influences than project activities, like a disaster, radio, or the introduction of mobile phones,.

H. SOME WORDS OF CAUTION

- ✓ It should be emphasised here that this tool requires a genuinely participatory approach: It is designed, most of all, to help community members to understand better the reasons for the change around them. It is only secondary that it serves the NGO (or evaluators) to get more information. Only then will people participate seriously and give reliable information.
- ✓ The Activity List cannot be used as the only instrument to assess change. It needs cross-checking with other tools, as a bias can develop (like with all other tools). It can also be systematically combined with other tools, like in MAPP (see reference to Tiny Tools on p.1).
- ✓ How often should an Activity List be drafted? It should not be done every year, but can be repeated after a few years.

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