

Identifying Critical Issues

What Is an Issue?

Issues are matters that are of concern to the broad population. They tend to be complex and not easy to solve. They consist of many facets, or interrelated problems, all of which need to be worked on in some systematic fashion to improve the situation.

For example, declining agricultural profits have been and continue to be a major issue of widespread concern in many counties. It is not a single problem for which there is a definitive answer or solution. It is not just a problem affecting agricultural producers; it affects families, businesses, and the economy as a whole. Likewise, substance abuse among youth is a major concern in many areas. Overindulgence in drugs and/or alcohol is not the result of one problem nor will it be solved by working only with youth. It involves families, educators, medical professionals, policy makers, and others.

Issues are all around us – dependent adults needing care, unemployment, AIDS, leadership gaps within families and communities, parents not being able to cope with life's demands and changes, rural out migration, family financial instability. An issue in one county may or may not be an issue in another county. Issues are different from single problems in that they are recognizable by the number of people who have the same concern in common and the intensity of the concern that is expressed.

In identifying issues, we need to separate complex problems from their symptoms. A headache is a symptom of an illness, stress or some condition. We must understand and address the underlying problem(s) to effectively treat the headache. Overextended bank accounts may be a problem, but the lack of skills or knowledge of money management is the issue. Think about the issues being

identified and make sure they represent broad concerns and not a singular problem or the symptom of a broader problem.

Where Do Issues Come From?

Issues arise out of the hearts/needs and concerns of people as they deal with the changes that are occurring around them. Just as situations change, so do issues change. Issues begin, they flourish, and end either through resolution (development of polio vaccine), termination (pull-out of American troops in Vietnam), or transformation (profitability of agriculture transforming to the issue of an environmentally sound, sustainable agriculture).

Are all issues the same? No. Issues have varying duration and intensity. Some may surface rapidly and attract much public interest very quickly (AIDS). Others have been evolving for a long time, get mixed support and are likely to be with us for a long time (environmental pollution). Issues are of three major types:

1. **Current issues** are obvious here and now. Public interest is high and action is needed.
2. **Emerging issues** are less widely recognized but they are apparent. They are seen as becoming increasingly important.
3. **Potential issues** aren't quite visible yet. They will eventually rise into problems of broad concern.

Most people deal with the here and now instead of what is known and can be seen. This falls under current issues. To be ready for tomorrow and to make it what we want, however, requires thinking about and identifying emerging and potential issues – those threats and/or opportunities that will impact our communities in the months ahead.

What Can You Do to Prepare?

To determine what the major current issues and potential issues are in the county requires a broad perspective of the social, economic, and environmental conditions seen today and anticipated over the next few years. Thinking in terms of people, economics, and environment cuts across all concerns in the county.

- Read. Look. Listen. Talk. Ask people about their important concerns.
- Questions to ask might include:
 - What are the major concerns in your life?
 - What do you think are the problems/potentials our county faces in the future?
 - What forces are impacting our county from the outside?
- Undertake an “issue scan” to become aware of the concerns across the county by looking at and/or talking with the following sources of information. These sources will be dependent upon the county – its population size, media sources available, linkage to other major centers, etc.
 - **Media** – newspapers, magazines, trade publications, professional journals, newsletters, specialized newspapers. If possible, read several newspapers (local and national) to balance any biases.
 - **Existing data** – opinion polls, agency records for social and economic indicators and trends: population, housing, crime, labor, health and nutrition, etc.

- **Knowledgeable others** – professionals, government officials, trendsetters, opinion leaders in the county and outside.
- **Public and private organizations** – committees, chambers of commerce, churches, etc. What are the issues/concerns being addressed by these organizations?
- **Public at large** – neighbors, families, friends and relatives, youth.

- Consider what is going on outside the county that now affects or may in the future affect the county. Counties tend not to be totally self-contained or self-sufficient. What is going on in the larger world, to which the county is linked, which is impacting the county (for example, government policies/regulations, markets, transportation system, water supply)?

An “issue scan” can result in the identification of literally dozens of issues, depending upon the size and diversity of the county. Not all will be of the same significance. It is possible to categorize issues into low, medium, and high importance depending upon the number of people affected and the impact of the issue on the total county.

During the process of identifying issues, it is important to recognize our own values and biases in relation to the issues being identified. We each have different things we value. We will evaluate the issues in relation to our own needs, interests, and beliefs. The doctor, farmer, parent, and county official will see the same thing differently. At this point, we want to take off our “blindness” and be as open and inclusive as possible in identifying issues affecting our county.

Information in this publication has been adapted for Arkansas. Original materials were prepared by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

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