Handout 16: Using Other Peoples Statistics – BEWARE!

DAVE COULD WE HAVE A BIG RED STOP OR DANGER SIGN HERE

There are a lot of already published statistics and reports that can be used to assist you to identify and understand the needs within your community. These reports and studies come from a range of organisations including government departments, universities, international organisations and non-government organisations. The resources that come from these organisations can provide useful information that can help you to make sense of what your community needs.

While these resources can be enormously helpful they should be approached with caution. It is necessary to consider carefully

- How the data was collected
- Why it was collected
- Exactly what it is supposed to measure.

Published statistics, even ones that come from reputable sources, are dependent upon the definitions they use and are affected by the ways they are collected. Statistics are not self-evident but depend upon assumptions, conceptions and the priorities of the organisations collecting the statistics. The people collecting the statistics also work with the same constraints as the rest of us – limited time and resources and the will of their political masters.

Statistics and other published research should therefore be approached with caution. They are merely further pieces of evidence for the needs you are trying to establish or the policy or political argument you are trying to advocate or defend.

Critically Reviewing other Peoples Research
To make the most of other people’s research it is best to approach it with a critical mind. Some things you might wish to consider are:

- How useful is the research? Does it present any new information that enhances you understanding of a particular social situation?
- Does it present information to you in a new way? That is does it take information you are already aware of and analysis it in a way that changes your thinking in the area?
- What is the ideology of the research? What political agendas seem to be operating?
- Who conducted the research? Who was the research prepared for and why? Who are the political masters of the project?
- What types of research methods were used on the project? What are some advantages and disadvantages of these methods?
• How are the key concepts defined in the research? Are these appropriate definitions? How do these definitions influence the information that has been collected?
• Did the research develop from a comprehensive understanding of the social situation it is studying?
• How reliable and valid are the research methods?
• How accessible is the research? Is it open to public scrutiny?