Planning for Community-based Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

We present a planning guide that can be used to improve community-based evaluation. The planning guide consists of a set of questions that need to be discussed with all stakeholders. It covers issues relating to the nature and purpose of a community-based evaluation project, research methods and approaches, participation and decision-making, conflict and conflict resolution, and dissemination and use of results. The planning guide was developed through our experiences in an HIV/AIDS research and evaluation unit and a review of the literature. If community-based evaluators keep in mind the questions in this planning guide and discuss them early on with stakeholders, the evaluation process should benefit.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we outline a planning guide for community-based evaluations. The guide consists of a set of questions to be discussed by all stakeholders to the evaluation. It was developed through our experiences with community-based groups at the University of Toronto's HIV/AIDS Social, Behavioral and Epidemiologic Studies Unit, and through our review of the literature. With its synthesis of lessons from our practice and from the literature, the guide is designed to provide a simple and user-friendly framework that can help guide evaluators and stakeholders as they negotiate their way through joint community-evaluator (or, more generally, joint community-researcher) projects.

Community-based evaluation, as we use the term, is not easy to define. For the purposes of this paper, it refers to a philosophy of inquiry that encourages active participation in the evaluation process from all involved communities. Community-based evaluation can accommodate a wide range of methods, from conventional quantitative to critical methodology, while allowing for variation in the nature of action and participation of involved communities. A community-based evaluation project may range from a full action research perspective to nothing more than the permission of a community to engage it in an evaluation initiative.

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Community itself is defined as a group of individuals who share social, cultural, and/or economic ties and who may (or may not) share a physical location (Cheadle, Wagner, Koepsell, Kristal, & Patrick, 1992).

The planning guide has been organized around five broad themes. First, there needs to be discussion and agreement on the nature and purpose of the evaluation project. The second theme focuses on the methodologies and skills that will be used in the project. In the third theme, emphasis is on the varying degrees of participation that communities and community representatives may desire. The fourth theme is concerned with decision-making, especially issues of conflict and conflict resolution. The fifth and final theme involves the dissemination of results to the community and the ways in which findings are to be turned into knowledge.

For each of these five themes, we pose a set of questions that evaluators and community members need to discuss and we briefly discuss related issues. Although we list the five themes separately, inevitably there is some overlap among them. In addition, although they are laid out in order, the discussion between evaluator and community members in practice is likely to shift dynamically across themes. For example, decisions about one theme may have implications for another, so discussion may cycle back to a theme that has previously been discussed.

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION PROJECT

Although all community-based evaluations seek to actively involve the community, the approaches subsumed under community-based evaluation differ in their specific purpose. They vary, for example, in the degree of evaluator-participant mutual learning, in the relative emphasis on formative or summative evaluation, and in the emphasis on action relative to research and theory building (Israel, Schurman, & Hugentobler, 1992). Key principles for the success of community-based evaluation include the development of trust, a recognition of the importance of the knowledge and personal experiences of all stakeholders, and joint development of the evaluation agenda (Fetterman, 1997).

In the first stage of organizing and structuring the project, the key questions to be answered center on the identification of stakeholders, on the goals and objectives of the project, and on the extent to which there is agreement on these goals and objectives. We suggest that the following questions need to be discussed:

- a. Who are the key stakeholders, and which communities do they represent?
- b. What are the intended consequences or outcomes of the investigation for each stakeholder?
- c. What are the potential benefits of, and concerns with, the project to the individuals and institutions involved?
- d. Is theory development and testing an element, or a byproduct, of the project, and how does this relate to other project objectives and the roles of stakeholders involved?
- e. Is there an action agenda, and how does this relate to other project objectives and the roles of stakeholders involved?

RESEARCH METHODS AND APPROACH

The primary objectives of a community-based evaluation project are often not limited to the acquisition of new information for decision-making purposes. As a result, issues relating to

the selection of the appropriate evaluation methodology and design, in light of project goals and objectives, become very important (Forrester & Ward, 1992). Conventional evaluation practices cannot simply be assumed to transfer to a community-based evaluation project. Instead, the evaluation plan needs to take into account community elements, such as motivations for involvement, skills brought to the project, skills that need to be acquired through involvement in the project, the existence of community-specific resources, and the intensity of inter- and intracommunity divisions.

During this stage of discussions, the issue of qualitative versus quantitative methods, which has long been of concern in the evaluation community, often needs to be negotiated. Evaluators from different perspectives often have strongly held views of the superiority of their methods (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994). Current views suggest that neither researchers nor funding agents should prematurely rush into either qualitative or quantitative studies without a basic understanding, and the involvement, of the community partners (Datta, 1997; Greene & Caracelli, 1997).

Discussion of methodologies for community-based evaluation also needs to consider the concepts of validity and bias. The validation of a community-based evaluation project is not necessarily thought to lie in descriptive numbers or significant statistics, but rather in corrective feedback and review by investigators and community participants (Creswell, 1998). Often, an element of a project will be considered valid if a number of people make the same observation and draw the same conclusion as the investigator and/or the community. In any case, the topic of validity, and more generally the topic of the nature of evidence required to help achieve the goals and objectives of the project, needs to be addressed.

More generally, we suggest that the following issues related to methods and design should be discussed:

- f. What evaluation design is most appropriate to meet the goals and objectives of the project?
- g. Will both the community and the evaluators be meaningfully involved in selecting the evaluation design?
- h. Who will be responsible for the creation of evaluation instruments? Data collection? Data analysis?
- i. What mechanisms will be used to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the review and revision of the evaluation instruments? Data collection? Data analysis? Interpretation?
- j. What control processes will be used to prevent error and bias?

PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

Collaboration between the community and the evaluation team requires negotiation and planning. Some elements that must be explored at the beginning stages of the evaluation relationship include the availability of time (of both the evaluator and community stakeholders), the characteristics of the participants and their compatibility in terms of the topic under investigation, and the interest in, and potential for, skill development for the individuals and institutions involved (Mertens, 1999). Training of community representatives in the activities of evaluation, and the time required for this, are areas that demand special attention.

Topics related to participation and decision-making that need to be discussed include:

- k. What are the respective roles of the community and the evaluation community?

l. What tasks are associated with the community member? With the evaluation community? Are these responsibilities clearly defined and understood by all stakeholders?

m. How will the project provide for the preparation and training of community members, if this is needed to fulfill responsibilities?

n. What consultative mechanisms will there be between the evaluation team and the community (and any third party or sponsoring agency)?

o. Will any stakeholder be able to exert ultimate control over the evaluation process (e.g., through control of resources, access to the study population, or control over dissemination of the final report)?

CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Consideration of the issues surrounding power and control is critical in community-based evaluation. Genuine partnerships are based on the recognition of power dynamics, and genuine collaboration necessarily involves a redistribution of power (Schwandt, 1997). What is often lacking in conventional evaluation relationships, and what is needed for community-based projects, are arrangements and mechanisms that ensure a balance among the interests of the evaluation, the researchers, the funding agents, and community members (Chavis, Stucky, & Wandersman, 1983; Chelimsky, 1997). Values, resources, skills, politics, and academic rewards all entail the give-and-take of power in the community evaluation environment.

The potential for conflict suggests that mechanisms for conflict resolution are essential to the process of community-based evaluation. One of the ways to reduce conflict or power imbalances is to install mechanisms of accountability (Mellor, 1988). Such mechanisms may encourage clarification of the roles for all participants and help provide the context whereby different partners and contributors may develop good working relationships with each other (Forrester & Ward, 1992). The development and maintenance of open channels of communication and dialogue should also facilitate discussion of power and control. Finally, if mechanisms for dealing with conflict are agreed on in advance, this may ensure that, when conflict does arise, it can be negotiated or at least reduced.

Specific questions about conflict and conflict resolution that we suggest discussing include:

p. Have participants identified and discussed inherent difficulties in conducting the evaluation?

q. Are there strategies for developing and maintaining trust and cooperation between the community and the evaluation team?

r. Has there been discussion, and agreement, on the ethical values that will guide the evaluation?

s. Are participants prepared for unanticipated conflict from the collaboration? Are there suitable mechanisms for mediation and conflict resolution?

DISSEMINATION AND USE OF RESULTS

The dissemination and use of results may be improved if members of the study population are closely involved in the development and execution of the project (Sommer, 1987). Thus,

community-based evaluation may be more likely to lead to use than other forms of evaluation that do not engage the community as actively. Nevertheless, even in community-based evaluation, the process of involving community members in all aspects of dissemination should lead to an increased acceptance and use of results (Ayers, 1987). This requires developing a clear method for decision making in terms of the use and dissemination of findings (Kaye, 1990).

Community-based projects often build dissemination strategies into their overall design. Many community-based projects are easily translated into programs of action because they provide insight into the methods of promoting empowerment through knowledge and control (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Whatever the type of evaluation project, an important way to increase dissemination and utilization of results is to synthesize and publicize the findings in an accessible language (Health and Welfare Canada, 1989/1990). This may entail exploring new and somewhat nonconventional forms of dissemination. The use of nonconventional avenues for the dissemination of results may be especially important for community-based evaluation (Pederson, Edwards, Kelner, Marshall, & Allison, 1988). Strategies derived from concepts of stakeholder evaluation and models of community development may also enhance the utilization of findings by the community. One means to increase the likelihood that the evaluation is accessible, disseminated, used, and diffused is to include a guide to how findings could or should be implemented (Posavac & Carey, 1997; Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999).

For issues of dissemination and use, we believe that the following questions need to be discussed:

- t. What will the final product or products look like?
- u. Who are the potential consumers of the results?
- v. How will the results be reported and diffused to the stakeholders involved in the project? To the funders of the project? To the consumers of the project?
- w. Who will assume responsibility for presenting the results?
- x. Is there a method for decision making in terms of the use and dissemination of research findings?
- y. Will the final product include suggestions for how findings could or should be implemented (i.e., will it include an action component)?

A PLANNING GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED EVALUATION

The planning guide provided in this paper consists of a series of questions that cover the different aspects of community-based evaluation. Our intent is not to offer a comprehensive review or theory of community-based evaluation, but to provide a planning guide that raises some of the key issues that our experiences and the literature suggest need to be negotiated for successful completion of community-based evaluation projects. We recognize that the issues addressed in the guide may be of differing importance in different projects. Nevertheless, these are the kinds of questions that, in our experience, often arise in community-based evaluation and that are important to reconcile.

Community-based evaluation is not an approach that can, or should, be applied to every population, nor to every evaluation question. As an approach, it is demanding for all stakeholders involved during all phases of a project (Schroes, Murphy-Berman, & Chambers, 2000). However, it can bring together people of diverse skills and knowledge, contribute

locally grounded and empirically sound information, and increase the likelihood that the results will be used by the community.

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