



community-based public health

# POLICY & PRACTICE

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## Participatory Evaluation What is it? Why do it? What are the challenges?

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**Y**ogi Berra was right when he remarked, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up somewhere else." When we collectively apply our hopes and energies to improving our communities, how do we know if we're making the right choices along the way? How will we notice when we are spinning our wheels and what changes to make? How will we know that we are making a difference? And how will we know what success looks like to everyone in the group?

By taking a community-based public health approach to our work, we create an opportunity to engage in a particular type of evaluation—participatory evaluation – that can help answer those questions. For those groups that are interested in this approach, this policy brief discusses the key concepts of participatory evaluation and some tips for applying it.

*We also present some real-life examples from two evaluators who work with grantees of the Partnership for the Public's Health Initiative.*

### What is participatory evaluation?

*"Participatory monitoring and evaluation is not just a matter of using participatory techniques within a conventional monitoring and evaluation setting. It is about radically rethinking who initiates and undertakes the process, and who learns or benefits from the findings."*

—Institute of Development Studies, 1998

**P**articipatory evaluation is a partnership approach to evaluation in which stakeholders actively engage in developing the evaluation and all phases of its implementation.

Those who have the most at stake in the program — partners, program beneficiaries, funders and key decision makers — play active roles. Participation occurs throughout the evaluation process including:

- > identifying relevant questions;
- > planning the evaluation design;
- > selecting appropriate measures and data collection methods;
- > gathering and analyzing data;

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- reaching consensus about findings, conclusions and recommendations;
- disseminating results and preparing an action plan to improve program performance.<sup>1</sup>

Fundamentally, participatory evaluation is about sharing knowledge and building the evaluation skills of program beneficiaries and implementers, funders and others. The process seeks to honor the perspectives, voices, preferences and decisions of the least powerful and most affected stakeholders and program beneficiaries.<sup>2</sup> Ideally, through this process, participants determine the evaluation's focus, design and outcomes within their own socioeconomic, cultural and political environments.

## Why do participatory evaluation?

**P**articipatory approaches require the commitment and valuable time of many. Yet, the benefits are far-reaching. Participatory evaluation allows groups to:

### *Identify locally relevant evaluation questions*

Participatory evaluation ensures that the evaluation focuses on locally relevant questions that meet the needs of program planners

## Guiding Principles of Participatory Evaluation

- ◆ Participant focus and ownership – Structures and processes are created to include those most frequently powerless or voiceless in program design and implementation. The participatory process honors human contributions and cultural knowledge.
- ◆ Negotiation – Participants commit to work together to decide on the evaluation focus, how it should be conducted, how findings will be used and what action will result. Often the process requires addressing differences in point of view and conflicts.
- ◆ Learning – Participants learn together to take corrective actions and improve programs.
- ◆ Flexibility – Uses creative methodologies to match the resources, needs and skills of participants.

*Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, 1996 and Institute of Development Studies, 1998*

and beneficiaries. Participatory approaches allow local stakeholders to determine the most important evaluation questions that will affect and improve their work.

### *Improve program performance*

Participatory evaluation is reflective and action-oriented. It provides stakeholders, including beneficiaries, with the opportunity to reflect on project progress and generate knowledge that results in being able to apply the lessons learned. It provides opportunities for groups to take corrective action and make mid-course improvements.

### *Empower participants*

A participatory approach is empowering because it claims the right for local people to control and own the process of making evaluation decisions and implementing them.<sup>3</sup> Participating in an evaluation from start to finish can give stakeholders a sense of ownership over the results. Recognizing local talents and expertise builds confidence and pride in the community, and among participants.

### *Build capacity*

Conducting a participatory evaluation promotes participant learning and is an opportunity to introduce and strengthen evaluation skills. Active participation by stakeholders can result in new knowledge and a better understanding of their environment. This, in turn, enables groups to identify action steps and advocate for policy changes. It can provide participants with tools to transform their environments.

### *Develop leaders and build teams*

Participatory evaluation builds teams and participant commitment through collaborative inquiry. Inviting a broad range of stakeholders to participate and lead different parts of the process can develop and celebrate local leadership skills. It can lead to stronger, more organized groups, strengthening the community's resources and networks..

### *Sustain organizational learning and growth*

Finally, a participatory evaluation is not just interested in findings; it is focused on creating a learning process. It creates a knowledge base among local people and organizations, which can be applied to other programs and projects. The techniques and skills acquired can lead to self-sustained action.<sup>4</sup>

## What are the challenges?

### *Time and commitment*

A participatory approach requires time and commitment from

*Continued on page 4*



## Differences Between Participatory and Conventional Evaluation

	Participatory	Conventional
Who drives the evaluation?	Community residents, project staff and other stakeholders	Funders and program managers
Who determines indicators of program progress?	Members of community groups, project staff and other stakeholders; evaluator	Professional evaluators and outside experts
Who is responsible for data collection, analysis and preparing final reports?	Shared responsibility of evaluator and participating stakeholders	Professional evaluators and outside experts
What is the role of the local evaluator?	Coach, facilitator, negotiator, “critical friend”	Expert, leader
When is this type of evaluation most useful?	<p>When:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there are questions about program implementation difficulties</li> <li>• there are questions about program effects on beneficiaries</li> <li>• information is wanted on a stakeholder’s knowledge of a program or views of progress</li> </ul>	<p>When:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• there is a need for independent judgment</li> <li>• specialized information is needed that only experts can provide</li> <li>• program indicators are standardized, rather than particular to a program</li> </ul>
What are the costs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time, energy and commitment from local residents, project staff and other stakeholders</li> <li>• Coordination of many players</li> <li>• Training, skills development and support for key players</li> <li>• Potential for conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultant and expert fees</li> <li>• Loss of critical information that only stakeholders can provide</li> </ul>
What are the benefits?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local knowledge</li> <li>• Verification of information from key players (validity)</li> <li>• Builds knowledge, skills and relationships among community residents and other stakeholders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent judgment</li> <li>• Standardized indicators allow comparison with other research findings</li> </ul>

## Voices From The Field

The PPH Initiative encourages a participatory evaluation approach that helps build the capacity of Local Partnership members and other interested stakeholders to design and conduct evaluations of their activities. Local Partnerships have been actively involved in the evaluation process through examining their Local Partnership Action Plans (LPAPs) and selecting evaluation indicators and methods. Each Partnership works with a locally-based evaluator who contributes to both the local evaluation process and to the statewide evaluation.

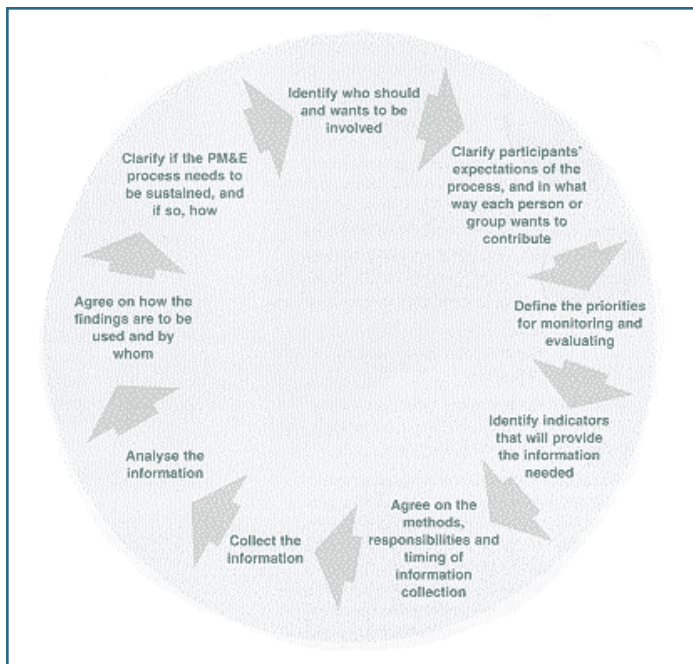
PPH recently spoke with two local evaluators about their experiences using participatory evaluation approaches with Partnerships: Juana Mora, PhD, works with Valleys United

for Health—Los Valles Unidos para la Salud, located in Los Angeles; and Sharon Brisolaro, PhD, with three partnerships in Shasta County. They shared lessons learned and tips for getting started using participatory approaches.

### *Ensure the evaluation supports the work of the community*

Community partnerships must focus on the “work of the community.” As Sharon Brisolaro finds, “PPH projects are ambitious and are one important element in a range of activities involving community groups and public health departments. The interest (in evaluation) is definitely present and there is a strong





many players. It involves coordinating, training and building the skills of diverse participants with varying backgrounds, skills and interest levels in the evaluation. It may be challenging to fully adopt a participatory approach on complex projects with many components. However, the participatory model doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing approach. It can be used for smaller parts of an overall evaluation and can be combined with more traditional evaluation methods.

## Resources

Since the evaluation process requires the involvement of many people, it is important to consider and allocate funds and resources realistically. This includes budgeting for adequate staff and time required of consultants and community residents.

## Conflict

Participatory evaluations require planning for conflict resolution among the individuals involved. Conflicts can arise because of cultural, language, class and other differences that exist among and within groups. These conflicts can hinder the successful teamwork required for participatory evaluation. Thus, decision-making and conflict resolution processes need to be established and used on an ongoing basis. Two important questions to address are: Who will make decisions? and, How will the group address conflict?

## How do you do it?

### Step 1: *Decide if a participatory evaluation approach is appropriate.*

Because of the intensity of effort, it is important to weigh the costs and benefits of using this approach. Many evaluations combine participatory and conventional approaches. The chart on page five lays out the differences between participatory and more conventional evaluations.

desire to learn more. When you work in rural communities with multiple needs and funding sources, there are often many immediate needs that require a Partnership's attention and limited staff to meet those needs." Juana Mora shares that her Partnership is dedicated first to meeting neighborhood needs. She notes that, "It takes time for groups to see that evaluation is part of the work of the community and that it is important to incorporate evaluation into their work."

### Consider group readiness

Mora observes that Partnership members often are at different levels of readiness to do participatory evaluation. Some may have vast experience, while others, community partners in particular, may not. Working with people who have different education levels and varying exposure to evaluation, may make it challenging to adopt a participatory approach right away. Mora recommends that "groups start out small and help each of the stakeholders develop a better understanding of the benefits of the process and build the skills needed to implement larger evaluation projects."

Shasta County participants have divided the LPAP work

among teams or individual evaluation liaisons in an effort to encourage more involvement, particularly among community residents. Using different participatory techniques with different groups, Brisolaro finds "an increased understanding and awareness on the part of Partnership members of the multiple benefits of evaluation, in particular of specific methods."

### Incorporate approaches that meet multiple language needs

Community partnerships that simultaneously interpret meetings or otherwise meet multiple language needs are particularly challenged to accomplish a lot of work within a limited amount of meeting time. This can raise issues when introducing evaluation tasks that call for collective work. In addition, "it is a challenge to bring people together to learn evaluation terms that are not always easy to translate," Mora says. She recommends paying special attention to carrying out a participatory process in a multi-lingual setting, saying, "an evaluator needs to work creatively with a group to come up with ways to meet language needs."



## Step 2: Identify who should and wants to be involved.

Determine who will participate and what roles they will play. How will project members be invited to participate? What will keep them involved? Depending on the project, it may be appropriate to create a small working group representative of project stakeholders. Two important steps are to ask for broad participation and to hold a meeting to discuss the process and what it requires.

## Step 3: Collaborate on creating an evaluation plan.

Collectively, the group defines the priorities for the evaluation. Activities include: identifying key objectives or outcomes; selecting relevant indicators that document change or show evidence of progress; agreeing on appropriate ways to collect information; and creating plans for data collection, analysis and action.

Selecting indicators and data collection methods is not always easy. There is a balancing act between choosing locally-relevant factors and those that can be applied more widely.<sup>5</sup> There is the issue of balancing what is considered to be credible and valid data with what is “good enough” for the task at hand. Participatory evaluations often require adapting data collection strategies to fit the skills of local participants and the local resources available. This approach may challenge what people consider rigorous data collection. Adopting participatory approaches requires accepting new, less rigid standards of what is relevant and valid data.<sup>6</sup>

Participatory evaluations often use rapid appraisal techniques,

## Rapid Appraisal Techniques Used in Participatory Evaluation

Key Informant Interviews	Interviews with a small number of individuals who are most knowledgeable about an issue.
Focus Groups	A small group (8-12) is asked to openly discuss ideas, issues and experiences.
Mini-surveys	A small number of people (25-50) is asked a limited number of questions.
Neighborhood Mapping	Pictures show location and types of changes in an area to be evaluated.
Flow Diagrams	A visual diagram shows proposed and completed changes in systems.
Photographs	Photos capture changes in communities that have occurred over time.
Oral Histories and Stories	Stories capture progress by focusing on one person's or organization's account of change.

For more information and ideas, go to:  
[www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/briefs/brief12.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/briefs/brief12.html)  
[www.dec.org/pdf\\_docs/pnabs539.pdf](http://www.dec.org/pdf_docs/pnabs539.pdf)

## Take advantage of various opportunities to use participatory approaches

Opportunities to use participatory evaluation approaches emerge at different times during a project. For example, the Valley Care Partnership recently discussed plans to conduct a health survey with 300 families. It soon became apparent that the group would need help analyzing the findings. Mora offered to provide support and arranged for a graduate student to train Partnership participants on how to input survey findings into a database and analyze those findings. This way, Partnership members will be trained in this aspect of the evaluation and the knowledge gained will remain in the community. Similarly, in Shasta County, community residents are involved in collecting survey data and will play an active role in analyzing and interpreting the findings.

## Build participant evaluation skills early in the project

In a PPH project, the best place to start is by building partnership skills and capacities in participatory evaluation. Dr. Mora will give workshops in the basics of evaluation for members

of the Valleys United for Health Care Partnership. In Shasta County, each Partnership has designated evaluation liaisons or evaluation teams who focus together on evaluation-related activities with Dr. Brisolará's support.

## Use approaches that appeal to Partnership members

Brisolará recommends using simple language to present evaluation concepts. “Use real contexts to think about ideas,” she says. She also suggests demonstrating how evaluation efforts can be consolidated; for example, using one survey to meet multiple needs, not just within the PPH project, but beyond it. The Shasta County Partnerships found something as simple as adding one or two questions to a survey can make the results useful for another project. “Consolidating efforts and information emphasizes that evaluation can be useful for the Partnership's own internal needs, and not just for an external agency,” Brisolará says. Mora recommends exploring different data collection methods to appeal to Partnership members, looking for creative ways to collect and present data. “My Partnership is very visually oriented and likes to



which are simpler, quicker and less costly than other traditional data collection methods. Using multiple methods helps ensure the validity and reliability of findings. Often, it is best to choose methods that neighborhood members and others can easily carry out, take short amounts of time to accomplish, and appeal to participants. Tasks like drawing, mapping or sorting photographs can create energy and enthusiasm that can appeal to participants' sense of what is important to them.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Step 4: Gather information, analyze it and build consensus on results, collectively.*

Once data are gathered, the group collectively analyzes the data to build a common body of knowledge. Then, facilitators can work with participants to reach consensus on findings, conclusions and recommendations.

#### *Step 5: Agree on findings and how they will be used.*

In this step, the group develops a common understanding of the results and, based on the findings, develops and commits to an action plan.

## Conclusion

Participatory evaluation approaches can be empowering, educational tools for community partnerships that can be used to ensure that evaluations address locally relevant questions, contribute to improving program performance, and support the development of sustain-

able partnerships. More importantly, the approach is focused on building the capacity of individuals and teams to carry out all steps in an evaluation process. In this respect, participatory evaluation can contribute to empowering communities to act and create change within their neighborhoods, community organizations and local governmental institutions.

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## Where to go for more information

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### About this Series

The policy brief series is part of PPH's commitment to its grantee partners; The California Endowment (that supports PPH); and the larger public health world. Each brief will define terms, identify challenges, share success stories and best practices, indicate issues for policy and systems change, and point towards key sources of further information. We encourage feedback and suggestions from our readers (please e-mail Adele Amodeo at [aamodeo@partnershipPH.org](mailto:aamodeo@partnershipPH.org)).

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use photos," she says. "The challenge is to identify methods that appeal to members and are useful to the community."

Both Brisolara and Mora suggest that community partnerships adopt participatory approaches step by step.

- Start out by identifying interest and opportunities to build member skills.
- Look for emerging opportunities to use participatory approaches on a small scale for one part of the evaluation.
- Try out creative ways to collect data that appeal to partnership members.
- Work continually to address language challenges.

For more information about Dr. Juana Mora's work with Valleys United for Health – Los Valles Unidos para la Salud, contact her at [juanamora@azteca.net](mailto:juanamora@azteca.net). For more information about Dr. Sharon Brisolara's work with the Shasta County Partnerships, e-mail her at [sharon@evaluationsolutions.net](mailto:sharon@evaluationsolutions.net).