Conducting Participatory Evaluation with Community Based Early Childhood Initiatives Long Summary Paper

Robyn McNeil

Centre for Community Child Health

Participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation is a process through which people involved at various levels of a project engage in ongoing evaluation of the project and its effects. The focus of participatory evaluation is to actively engage those people who the project is intended for in all aspects of the evaluation process, including planning, analysis and applying learning from an evaluation process (Haviland, 2004). According to Haviland (2004), the key principles of participatory evaluation are:

- To involve the people who the evaluation is for in the process as active participants, rather than merely sources of information

- To build the capacity of local community members to gather information, analyse, reflect and take more effective action

- To support the joint learning of all the people involved in an initiative or program

- To help communities commit to taking more effective action in an initiative or program.

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) model is participatory and interactive and places its greatest emphasis on working in partnership with community agencies to evaluate their initiatives. The Centre works in a consultative role, providing technical advice and assistance to community agencies, with the aim of supporting and teaching them the skills to be able to conduct their own evaluations.

A participatory approach was developed and chosen by the Centre as the most effective method of evaluating community-based initiatives for three key reasons.

Firstly, the participatory evaluation model fits with the Centre's mission of *'Supporting Communities to Improve Children's Health'*. Through its evaluation work, the Centre not only aims to assess how successful a particular initiative is, it also seeks to support communities to improve services for families and children and make a positive difference to their lives.

Secondly, the participatory approach aims to enhance existing strengths within a community or agency, using local resources wherever possible, to build the capacity of a community and empower community members. By conducting the evaluation in partnership with the community, it is anticipated that community agencies will have a greater sense of ownership over the results.

Thirdly, the Centre's evaluation model strongly encourages communities to focus on outcomes rather than outputs. Evaluation is becoming increasingly recognised by government and services as an important component of improving outcomes for children and families. This interest is growing out of the recognition that evidence is needed to establish whether community-based initiatives are improving the desired outcomes. The Centre's evaluation model encourages community-based initiatives to shift from being output driven to outcomes focused.

Key steps in the evaluation model

Generally there are seven steps in the CCCH local evaluation model, all of which are carried out by Centre staff in partnership with the community initiative. In some initiatives an eighth step of review and amendment of frameworks is required where there is more than one phase of reporting.

Figure 1: Participatory evaluation model – key steps and roles

STEP	CCCH role	Agency role
STEP 1: PLANNING		
• Review research evidence • Develop partnerships • Conceptual clarification • Strategic planning	Facilitate workshop	Organise and attend workshop
STEP 2: INTRODUCTION TO EVALUATION		
Conduct evaluation workshop	Facilitate workshop	Organise and attend workshop
STEP 3: EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS		
Build frameworks around outcomes	Explain purpose of frameworks Begin writing frameworks Finalise frameworks	Learn framework definitions Small group work to finalise framework drafts
STEP 4: TOOLS		
Design data collection tools	Explain purpose of tools and types Provide example tools Check final tools	Write draft questions/outlines for tools
STEP 5: DATA COLLECTION		
Collect information using tools	Model collection techniques (eg demonstrate interview) Minimal involvement	Collect all necessary data (eg through interviews, surveys, observation)
STEP 6: DATA ANALYSIS		
Interpret information collected	Explain simple data analysis techniques (eg thematic analysis) Provide examples of data analysis (eg quotes and graphs) Quality check agency analysis	Attempt analysis of data with support from CCCH
STEP 7: REPORTING		
Report on evaluation findings	Explain report-writing process Quality check reporting	Write sections of report based on analysis
STEP 8: REVIEW AND AMEND EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS		
	Review and amend frameworks as required Advise on suitable tools/data collection	Review and amend frameworks as required Discuss capacity and options for data collection and tools

Step 1: Planning

Planning involves a number of components which are usually conducted simultaneously in one or two workshops led by Centre staff. The components include a presentation of the relevant literature, developing partnerships, strategic planning and conceptual clarification. The workshops are attended by all community agencies involved in delivering the initiative to be evaluated.

It is important to note that this step is only required for projects that employ the Centre from the beginning of the initiative.

Reviewing the literature involves the Centre identifying and presenting research evidence to the community. Demographic changes in families and society are presented, followed by summaries of the types of interventions that work to improve outcomes for children and families in Australia and overseas. The information provided is used by the community agency to decide on which interventions to implement.

Partnership development is introduced to the community implementing the initiative (that is, the representatives from different community agencies and government departments) through a presentation at a workshop, often following on from the literature discussion (see *Community Partnership Resource*, 2006). One of the important relationships to be developed at this time is the partnership between the Centre evaluator and community agency.

Strategic planning involves developing a long-term strategic plan in light of the research evidence discussion and other locally available data, such as the demographics of the area or data obtained from community consultations. The aim is to match key themes emerging from the demographics and other data to relevant evidence-based interventions. During this phase, the Centre works closely with the community agency to obtain *conceptual clarification*, that is, to clarify and establish a shared understanding of what the community group or agency wants to achieve. It is at this point that the concept of evaluation is first introduced. It is important to do this during the initial planning stages. Introducing evaluation early means that the initiative is measurable and can be easily applied to an evaluation. It also means that evaluation is seen as part of the initiative, not merely something that is done in addition to it.
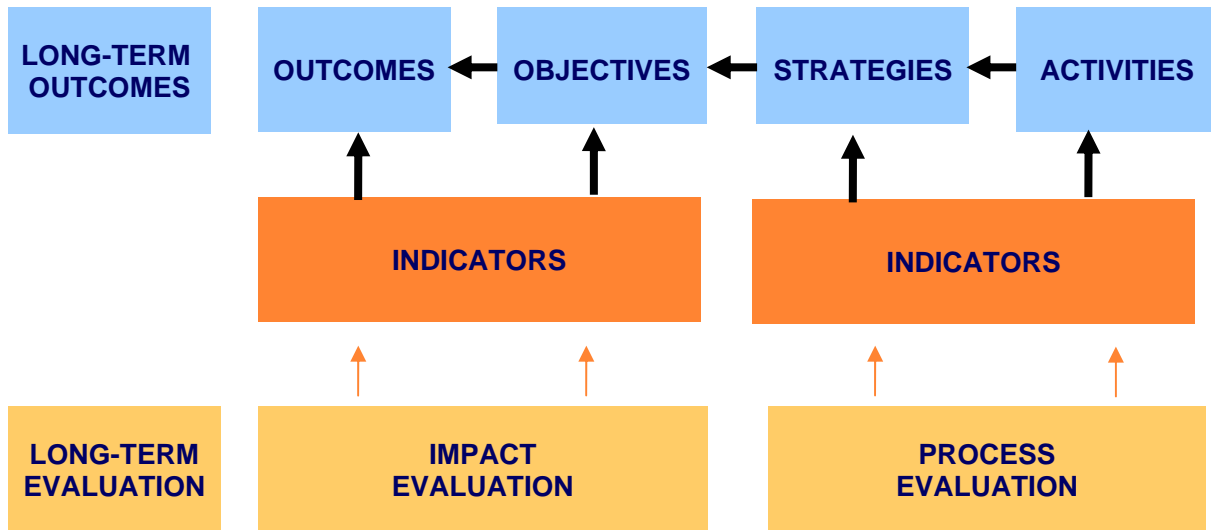
Step 2: Introduction to evaluation

This step involves the Centre facilitating an *evaluation workshop* with all the people involved in delivering the community-based initiative. The workshop is held to explain in simple terms what evaluation involves. The workshop aims to provide a simple and clear message about evaluation and its importance to make the concept of evaluation appear non-threatening. It also ensures that everyone involved in the initiative has a consistent understanding of what evaluation means and has agreed definitions of the different types of evaluation.

The evaluation workshop is usually delivered early on, most often after the first planning workshop. The workshop focuses on clearly defining outcomes, objectives and strategies, from which an evaluation framework is designed (usually in small group work).

Step 3: Evaluation frameworks

Once the community has a clear understanding of evaluation, the next step is to decide on what the evaluation will examine. To do this the Centre uses a framework that starts with outcomes. The evaluation framework is based on a program logic model. A program logic model is a way of analysing a program, its components and the linkages between what a program does and what it is expected to achieve. A key characteristic of this model is that the 'means' (what you do) and the 'ends' (the results or outcome of what you do) are separated (Moore & Sargood, 2005). A logical link between all of these components are formed. A diagram of the framework is presented below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Evaluation framework

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES → **OUTCOMES** ← **OBJECTIVES** ← **STRATEGIES** ← **ACTIVITIES**

INDICATORS   **INDICATORS**

LONG-TERM EVALUATION   **IMPACT EVALUATION**   **PROCESS EVALUATION**

The evaluation frameworks include outcomes, objectives, strategies, activities, and indicators and can be broken into three types of evaluations: process, impact and long-term.

- *Outcomes* should reflect what your project is wishing to achieve. It is a global statement that answers the question: 'What is it that we want for children and their families in our community?' In framing outcomes, the questions to ask are: What is the overall effect that is being sought? What will be the end result? What is the ultimate purpose of the project? Why are we doing it?

- *Objectives* focus on specific targets that need to be achieved in order for an outcome to be reached. Objectives address the question, 'To make progress to the initiatives outcome, what do you need to achieve?' Objectives need to be measurable, achievable and realistic.

- *Strategies* are long-term plans of action designed to achieve an initiative's outcomes. Strategies describe how the outcomes will be achieved, what will be done. They address the question 'How are we going to get to where we want to go with this initiative?'

- *Activities* are the more specific actions and operational details of what is going to be done within each strategy.

- *Indicators* are measures where some change has occurred, such as broad changes in behaviour, attitude, condition or status. When carrying out an evaluation it is important to decide on 'how much' change is enough to suggest a desired amount of change. Indicators are created to define the 'how much', so that you will be able to answer the question – 'Is the project working or not?'

The Centre works closely with the community through each of the components of the framework, explaining (using examples) and brainstorming each concept. Through this process the community is taught the basics of evaluation.

The evaluation frameworks are developed by the Centre together with the community agency. The centre then works closely with a community agent (or data manager) from the agency located within the community and to provide hands-on learning about the evaluation process, including how to: set measurable outcomes, objectives and indicators develop data collection tools collect data analyse data using a range of techniques and write evaluation reports.

Step 4: Tools

The evaluation frameworks are used to inform the evaluation methodology and identify the most appropriate evaluation tools. The Centre assists the community (such as through the community agent/data manager) to develop tools for their particular initiative. The Centre also provides example tools and tools used for other initiatives where appropriate. Evaluation tools can

include both qualitative and quantitative techniques, such as journals, surveys, attendance records, interviews, focus groups, mapping exercises, case studies and document analysis. Design of tools is developed using the indicators in the framework to come up with appropriate methods of data collection by considering: what information needs to be gathered; possible sources for the information; processes for information gathering for each case; and the type of data (qualitative, quantitative or both).

Step 5: Data collection

Data collection is conducted by the community, not by Centre staff. All the data collected is checked by the Centre for its consistency with the evaluation framework, and most importantly, the outcomes. The Centre works alongside the community (usually the data manager) and teaches them forms of data collection. The Centre will often demonstrate and model things such as carrying out an interview or filling out a survey, or a workshop is held with community members to practice data collection skills, such as interviewing. Centre staff members may also model or attend initial interviews or focus groups.

Step 6: Data analysis

The Centre works alongside the community and teaches them in a practical way about how to analyse the data collected (eg, to identify main themes, calculate percentages and create graphs) and present the data in a report format. Often this is the first time the community agency representative has analysed data and written a report of this kind so close supervision is required. All data analysis is fed back to the community for verification and comment.

Step 7: Reporting

Once the analysis is approved, an evaluation report is compiled by the community. As with the data analysis, often this is the first time the community agency representative has written a report of this kind so close supervision is necessary on the part of the Centre. The primary aim of the evaluation report is to demonstrate to the community the impact of the community-based initiative. The Centre works closely with the community advising on report writing, formatting of reports and finally review of written material and provide required advice, expertise and support.

Step 8 Review (and amend frameworks)

Some evaluations will have more than one phase, which may include the production of an interim report, for example: Communities for Children. Once the interim report has been disseminated, a process of reflection and review of the program occurs where the community can see the impact of the program, where things have been successful as well as any gaps or areas for improvement. The Centre then works closely with community agencies to review and analyse and amend (where necessary) the evaluation frameworks. Frameworks may need to modified depending on the current relevance of each step, and this process works in order from outcomes to objectives, strategies, indicators and finally activities, data and tools and data .

Participatory Strengths and Challenges

There are several key strengths of the participatory model:

1. The model acknowledges each community's existing strengths and aims to build the capacity within the community to conduct its own evaluations. This will encourage ongoing feedback on initiatives beyond the involvement of the Centre's involvement, meaning that the evaluation approach is sustainable. Communities will have had first hand experience in conducting evaluations and can use these new skills in future projects.

2. By focusing on increasing the understanding of evaluation amongst the community, those involved in the initiative will have a sense of ownership of the results, encouraging improvements where needed. This will also mean that service providers have an increased understanding of what interventions work best to improve outcomes for children and families.

3. Having a local 'community agent' is integral to the effectiveness of the evaluation approach because these people are well connected within the community, geographically located in the site and are familiar with the local issues.

4. As the local community actually conducts the evaluation, with the support of the local evaluator in an advisory capacity; this approach is cost effective.

5. The evaluation approach concentrates its efforts on what is best for communities, families and children by striving to be community centred. The approach developed by the Centre is primarily concerned with supporting communities so that they are able to improve outcomes for children and families. It is not just about evaluating an initiative for the purpose of an assessment.

There are several associated key challenges with the participatory model:

1. The issue of time is a key challenge of this evaluation approach, in particular with the planning step as well as the review and amending frameworks step (where applicable). This is due to the nature working of in collaboration. Spending time forming relationships, ensuring an understanding of the evaluation and outcomes models and then developing the frameworks. Deciding on outcomes and setting objectives, and articulating them in ways that are clear, measurable, achievable and realistic, is been a lengthy process.

2. The evaluation model has challenges associated with staff changes, both within the community agencies and the Centre. This has occurred most often in the long-term projects, such as CfC, and has meant information and processes are lost, and that there may be inconsistencies or confusion about the evaluation and the different roles of the Centre and the community agency. It is particularly challenging with the community agent role given the amount of time and energy invested into this person developing new evaluation skills.

3. For the process to be successful and ultimately sustainable the community needs to value the process of evaluation. This can be challenging as previous experiences with evaluation may not have been positive. It is also challenging as to value the process, the community needs to understand and often experience the process to value it, and as mentioned previously, this takes time.

Additional reflective learnings from case studies-Local Answers and Communities for Children.

Both Local Answers and Communities for children are national government initiatives aimed and delivering local solutions to children and families in identified areas of need.

The Centre for Community Child Health was contracted to fulfill evaluation requirements in both initiatives, and developed and implemented a participatory outcomes based model for both projects.

In addition to the above points, key reflective learnings from both of these projects provide further insight into the Centre's model.

Strengths:

- As the community is involved in the evaluation, the process helps the community better understand or develop a broader vision of the projects/program.

- The model highlights the strengths and limitations of a community in a 'real way'.

- The design of the model is quite flexible to adapt to the capacity of the community involved in terms of resources; human and fiscal; as well as skills of the community involved in the process. The models also allows for review and amendments to the frameworks to reflect change of the project/program over time.

- The model facilitates people to become 'change agents' for the services they are operating.

- The data that the evaluation is looking to capture is the real voices of service recipients -the community.

- The model puts the community in touch with process learnings. For example: at a macro level it enables community agencies to reflect and analyse partnerships, the potential sustainability of projects as well as the bigger picture for the community. At a micro level is allows services to reflect on and analyse service delivery to be able to highlight successes, as well as identify gaps and areas for improvement.

Challenges

- The capacity of the community agents. This is in relation to both their skills as well as their role. For example: some community agents have a dual role of both community development officer and the data manager/community agent in programs. This can be a reflection of funding constraints, as well as the nature of community development. In addition, the community agents may not have the computer or writing skills that are required for this type of approach, participatory for the reporting phase of the model.

- Staff changes, both within the community agencies and the Centre can present a challenge to the model.. This has occurred most often in the long-term projects, such as CfC, and has meant information and processes are lost, and that there may be inconsistencies or confusion about the evaluation and the different roles of the Centre and the community agency. It is particularly challenging with the data manager role given the amount of time and energy invested into this person developing new evaluation skills.

- Although the model follows program logic, it can be 'messy'. This is due to the numbers of people involved, the numbers of services involved, differing skill levels of those performing evaluation processes as well as having sufficient time and funding for evaluation.

- There is a general consensus that there is a loss if objectivity with participatory evaluation when compared with an external evaluator performing an evaluation.

Indigenous, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) issues

As well as the above mentioned points there are considerations for working with Indigenous and/ or CALD communities. Whilst every situation is different, reflections through the Centres projects have indicated some general considerations.

- Need to ensure time is allowed for engagement of people.

- Need to allow time to establish trust and ensure sufficient time and 'space' to build relationships.

- Need to be aware and respectful of cultural issues.

- Awareness of special requirements for example: interpreting services, the need for reciprocity.

- The need for flexible and/or creative methods of data collection.

- The key principle is respect.

In conclusion, the use of participatory approach itself promotes respect for the community you are partnering with to deliver the evaluation. This is in line with the CCCH principle to respect the community you are working with. The CCCH participatory approach thus models how we would expect people in the community to work with each other, whether this is service to service, or service to families or other users of services.