Practice Notes from a Participatory Impact Evaluation of a Leadership Development Program for People Living with HIV

Janice Duddy, Mona Lee, Paul Kerber, Alfiya Battalova
Pacific AIDS Network. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Elayne McIvor
Catalyst Consulting, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: *Interest in participatory evaluation and other collaborative inquiry approaches has risen substantially over the past few decades. However, there appears to be a lack of practical information about using and applying participatory evaluation approaches on the ground. This Practice Note uses a participatory impact evaluation of a leadership development program for people living with HIV and findings from a meta-evaluation of this work to describe the participatory evaluation approach adopted, challenges and lessons learned related to conducting a participatory evaluation, and some key factors and implications to consider for maximizing the success of future participatory evaluations.*

Keywords: *evaluation community, evaluation methods, program evaluation, stakeholders*

Résumé : *L'intérêt pour l'évaluation participative et d'autres méthodes d'enquête collaborative a considérablement augmenté au cours des dernières décennies. Cependant, il semble y avoir un manque d'informations pratiques concernant l'utilisation et l'application des approches d'évaluation participative sur le terrain. Cette note sur la pratique utilise une évaluation d'impact participative du programme de développement du leadership pour les personnes vivant avec le VIH et les résultats d'une méta-évaluation de ce programme pour décrire la méthode d'évaluation participative adoptée, les difficultés rencontrées et les enseignements tirés de la réalisation d'une évaluation participative, et certains facteurs et implications clés à prendre en compte pour maximiser le succès des futures évaluations participatives.*

Mots clés : *communauté d'évaluation, méthodes d'évaluation, évaluation de programme, parties prenantes*

Corresponding author: Janice Duddy, 603 – 402 West Pender Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, V6B 1T6; janice@pacificaidsnetwork.org

Interest in participatory evaluation and other collaborative inquiry approaches has risen substantially over the past few decades. Participatory evaluation (PE) is an approach designed to engage participants in the research or evaluation process, rather than a specific set of methods or techniques. It relies on engaging nonevaluator partners in the act of inquiry (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012). Participatory evaluations explore multiple perspectives to derive shared meanings (Cooper, 2017). It supports a more democratic and political approach to evaluation in that it raises questions about who defines and measures change and for whose benefit this is done (Estrella et al., 2000). From an organizational perspective, PE is possible when it is valued by the organization, when time and resources are allocated, when organization is committed to learning, and when primary users are motivated to participate (Zukoski et al., 2018).

The roles assumed in participatory evaluations vary from traditional evaluations, with evaluators and community partners taking the roles of a coach, educator, provider of technical assistance, among others (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2014). Participatory approaches to evaluation increase the likelihood of partners using the information generated by the process. This occurs due to an increase in the sense of ownership of the evaluation, credibility and trust in the process, and a more thorough cognitive processing of the information (Cousins, 2003; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2000). Participatory evaluations have been increasingly adopted in working with diverse groups (Guta et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2011; Souleymanov et al., 2016).

Depending on the ultimate aim of PE, there are two main types: practical participatory evaluation (P-PE) and transformative participatory evaluation (T-PE) (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; King et al., 2007). The goal of the P-PE is to increase the use of evaluation results through the involvement of intended users (Smits & Champagne, 2008), whereas the T-PE is rooted in the principles of anti-oppression and decolonization that need to be addressed through a dialogue. To be transformative, the messages exposed through dialogues must be situated within broader conditions (poverty, colonization) to draw a connection to structural problems (MacKinnon, 2018).

Amidst a growing appreciation for the value of participatory evaluation within community initiatives, literature reports that attempts to support and build capacity for this work have been challenging. Reported challenges include limited time and other resources for evaluation activities; communication barriers that can limit the contact necessary to build trust and effective working relationships; and past experiences that were not respectful of the different perspectives and lived experiences (Fawcett et al., 2003).

While the conceptual dimensions of participatory evaluation have been well defined in the literature (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) and its merit has been justified from theoretical and empirical bases (Cousins, 2003), there appears to be less literature about the practical aspects of using and applying the participatory approach and the challenges related to it. This Practice Note aims to address this gap by illustrating an on-the-ground application of participatory impact evaluation

of a leadership development program for people living with HIV in British Columbia and sharing the findings of a meta-evaluation (i.e., an evaluation of this participatory impact evaluation) conducted by an independent consultant. In this article, the authors describe the participatory evaluation approach adopted, the challenges and lessons learned related to conducting a participatory evaluation, and some key factors and implications to consider in maximizing the success of participatory evaluations.

BACKGROUND

The Pacific AIDS Network (PAN) is a provincial, member-based coalition that provides a network to and builds capacity and skills of its 40 member organizations to effectively respond to HIV, hepatitis C, and related issues in British Columbia. The Positive Leadership Training Program (PLDI) is a three-module leadership-training program offered at PAN, exclusively by and for people living with HIV (referred to henceforth as people with lived experience [PWLE]). The purpose of the Leadership Training Program is to support PWLE to realize their leadership potential and increase their capacity to meaningfully participate in and contribute to the community. From 2009 to 2016, over 160 participants across British Columbia completed the leadership training. Although evaluations are conducted after each training, PAN realized the need to conduct a deeper investigation to understand the impacts of the program on its participants, the community-based organizations that support them, and the greater HIV sector.

An Evaluation Steering Committee was established early on to oversee and guide the evaluation. The Committee comprised a wide representation of partners, including the program's staff and trainers, PWLE who had been participants in the program, funders, and community-based organizations involved with the program.

PAN's evaluation staff recruited peer evaluators who were PWLE and who had other lived experiences relevant to the program to develop and implement the evaluation. The peer evaluators had not worked on evaluation projects previously, so PAN's staff provided them with training and coaching on each step of the evaluation process to develop their knowledge, skills, and capacities. This involved a just-in-time approach to training, when the right information is provided just ahead of when it is needed to be used. PAN's staff, peer evaluators, and the Evaluation Steering Committee comprised the "core evaluation team."

META-EVALUATION OF PAN'S PROGRAM PARTICIPATORY IMPACT EVALUATION

Meta-evaluation data collection

The meta-evaluation was conducted by an independent contractor (McIvor (Vlahaki), 2017). The core evaluation team was invited to participate in the

meta-evaluation at two different time points: midway through the project and upon project completion. For the midline evaluation, the core program evaluation team was invited to participate in an online survey to assess early successes and challenges of conducting participatory evaluation.

Upon project completion, the core evaluation team was invited to participate in telephone interviews to explore satisfaction with the evaluation process, project successes, challenges, and lessons learned. PWLEs were provided an honorarium for their participation. The core evaluation team also engaged in a self-reflection exercise about their respective experiences in adopting a participatory evaluation approach.

Meta-evaluation data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding and analysis techniques in Microsoft Word. Descriptive statistics analysis on quantitative data was run in Microsoft Excel.

META-EVALUATION FINDINGS

Participation in data collection and analysis

A total of 12 people completed the online, midline meta-evaluation survey, which represents 92% of the potential respondents $(N = 13)$. An even distribution of peer evaluators, Steering Committee members, and PAN staff completed the survey (i.e., four respondents per group).

A total of eight individuals participated in the endline phone interviews, which represents 57% of the potential respondents $(N = 14)$. Interviewees included representation from members of the Evaluation Steering Committee $(n = 3)$, the peer evaluators $(n = 3)$, and PAN's staff $(n = 2)$. It is important to highlight that some interviewees represented multiple perspectives, such as Steering Committee members who are also the program's graduates. Three individuals declined to participate in an interview, and three others did not respond.

Challenges of adopting a participatory approach to evaluation

Applying the participatory evaluation approach consumed more time and resources than initially anticipated. Substantial time and resources were required to build relationships among members of the core evaluation team, intensively train peer evaluators in each evaluation step, and support shared decision making throughout the project. Some meta-evaluation respondents reported that it would have been beneficial to have more time for training and mentoring prior to commencing the actual evaluation.

Time was required for the team to come to a common understanding of what participatory evaluation entailed and how to conduct an evaluation using this approach. Time was also needed to train peer evaluators on general program evaluation knowledge, steps of evaluation, and how to think evaluatively.

Meta-evaluation respondents noted challenges with virtual interactions for project meetings, training, and ongoing communication. Peer evaluators and Evaluation Steering Committee members were intentionally hired and recruited from across the province in order to adequately reflect the provincial nature of the program. PAN's staff experimented with different technology platforms to mitigate issues related to and facilitate building connections; however, the issue of meaningful engagement across geography remains an ongoing challenge.

Despite the importance of training in participatory evaluation, the interviewees shared some ideas for how the evaluation training sessions could be improved in the future. Four reported that more time was needed for trainees to absorb the information, identify gaps in knowledge, and develop a true understanding of the concepts. Three interviewees reported that while the just-in-time training approach was effective, it would have been beneficial to have all of the learning materials in advance so trainees could read ahead and gain an understanding of the larger evaluation process. Finally, two interviewees reported challenges with learning by distance if they participated in training virtually, such as connection issues and feelings of isolation.

Peer evaluators were not engaged in the data analysis and report-writing process as initially planned due to time and resource constraints (McIvor (Vlahaki), 2017). Even though an alternative process to engage peer evaluators in the data analysis was developed and common themes were discussed, some peer evaluators reported not feeling engaged in the analysis process overall.

Strengths of participatory evaluation

Most interviewees reported that the evaluation training sessions led by PAN's support staff were very useful throughout the program's impact evaluation process. Four interviewees were particularly satisfied with the "just-in-time" learning technique that PAN staff used and the opportunity to learn from previously developed examples. One interviewee expressed appreciation for the respectful learning environment that was fostered during the training sessions, as it provided them with a space to ask questions and learn at their own pace.

Half of the interviewees reported improvements in the self-esteem and capacity to conduct future evaluations as a result of participating in the evaluation training sessions. As one of them reported:

> . . . my self esteem is boosted . . . I come with pre-conceived notions that I am not going to be heard and not taken seriously but now I feel like I can walk into a room with peers and feel like I'm not a sore thumb.

Half of the interviewees also reported that they have been able to apply the knowledge and skills they developed during the evaluation training sessions in other contexts. These interviewees explained that they have been able to apply their learning to other research and evaluation projects, such as how to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Another interviewee reported that the training
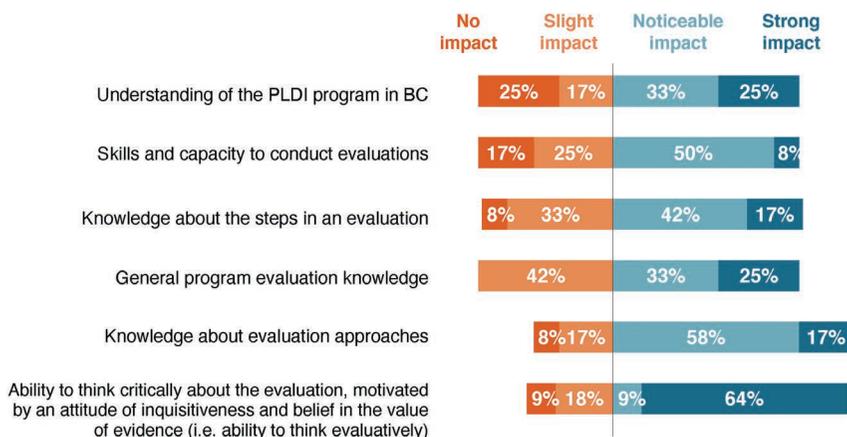
Figure 1. Survey respondents' ratings of any impact the PLDI's evaluation has had on their evaluation knowledge and skills

sessions taught them how to foster more collaborative approaches within other research and evaluation projects.

Other partners emphasized the value in learning from a diversity of perspectives and different ways of knowing throughout evaluation processes (e.g., learning from people with lived experience). Team members who responded to the survey identified a number of key impacts the PLDI's evaluation had on their evaluation skills and knowledge, including on increasing their knowledge of evaluation approaches and their ability to think critically about the evaluation (see Figure 1). Reflecting on the value that peers brought to evaluation, specifically data collection, one participant said, "Peers just connect to each other. That created this rapport that might not be as easy to achieve with a professional outside of the peer group." During data collection, we found that Peer Evaluators built rapport more quickly and deeply with evaluation participants.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVALUATION PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The findings of the meta-evaluation demonstrated that participatory evaluation is a value-based practice that seeks to serve the needs of a range of partners, including participants, practitioners, and organizations and funders. It supports a more democratic and political approach to evaluation in that it raises questions about who defines and measures change and for whose benefit this is done.

Informed by the findings of the meta-evaluation and through team reflection and learning, we propose the following approaches to actively and meaningfully engage program participants and key partners in evaluation through all stages of the process:

1. **Account for necessary resources from the start.** Given the focus on learning, discussion and shared decision making in participatory evaluation (Fawcett et al., 2003), substantial time and resources are required. If sufficient resources are not available, adopting this approach could pose risks for unintentional harm to partners involved (e.g., tokenism rather than meaningful engagement of partners, damaged trust, unpaid work and unethical burnout especially for PWLE). Evaluation budgets need to adequately account for human resource funds (staff time, honoraria) as well as communication, meeting, and any training expenses to support the project from its start to finish (Cooper, 2017). It is also important to budget funds for knowledge translation, dissemination, and action-planning activities.

2. **Establish trust and relationships.** This is critical for providing a space conducive to meaningful learning for all partners. Trust and relationships were foundational to provide support to peer evaluators when they were grappling with learning evaluation concepts and dealing with personal issues. Relationship building is also key to avoiding "pseudo-participation" and establishing a process that is meaningful for everyone (Chouinard & Cousins, 2015).

3. **Adopt** "**just-in-time" training**. A "just-in-time" approach was adopted to train Peer Evaluators. PAN staff facilitated a training session using a created Peer Evaluator Training Manual (Duddy, 2017) on a particular step in the evaluation process immediately before peer evaluators were to apply their learnings to the program's participatory impact evaluation. For example, peer evaluators received training on how to design a partner engagement plan, and then they immediately applied their learning by drafting this plan for the program's participatory impact evaluation. Further, peer evaluators were particularly satisfied with this training approach as it provides information to the learner when they need it rather than requiring the learner to store large quantities of knowledge that may or may not be useful to their project. Through a reduction in the time between learning and applying information, learners' retention of knowledge and satisfaction with the training increase.

4. **Fairly compensate all partners who are not paid staff.** This is an important step to ensure power imbalances between various partners are mitigated and partners are able to participate equitably. PWLE supporting the evaluation work should be paid a wage, honorarium, or another form of compensation in order to honor their time and expertise.

5. **Ensure partner diversity.** A diversity of voices, experiences, skills, and competencies brought forth by different partners, including funders, community-based organizations, PWLE, and staff, provides a wider scope across all steps of an evaluation. Critique and reflection of the evaluation process and method increased with the diversity of perspectives. This allows the evaluation to ask more comprehensive questions and maximize the use and sharing of findings, and it ensures a more

effective and rigorous evaluation process and outcomes reflective of the broader community (Rice & Franceschini, 2007).

6. **Focus on capacity bridging.** Acknowledging that everyone on the team has capacity to build is important for fostering a learning-focused environment and deconstructing power hierarchies that traditionally divide those with academic knowledge from those in the community. Working in this reciprocal manner, the team is able to achieve best outcomes (AHA Centre, 2018). For the program's participatory impact evaluation, some team members had expertise on evaluation methods and approaches while others taught the team about the program or what it means to be living with HIV.

7. **Clearly define roles and encourage open communication**. For the program's participatory impact evaluation team, this meant stepping out of traditional roles for this participatory model to work. Evaluation experts and PAN staff let go of control and took on a supportive coaching role, while peer evaluators took the lead on the project and the Evaluation Steering Committee provided guidance and governance support. This role shifting and communicating openly about the roles enabled the team to conduct a true participatory evaluation and engage in meaningful capacity bridging.

8. **Be flexible and trust in the organic participatory evaluation process**. A substantial amount of ongoing adaptation and flexibility was required throughout the evaluation, given the new and innovative nature of the approach employed. The evaluation process was treated as an experiment where unexpected issues and challenges were interpreted as learnings rather than failures.

CONCLUSION

The article has provided a real-world example of participatory evaluation and outlined the strengths and challenges of this approach based on the meta-evaluation of the program. Overall, the participatory evaluation approach promotes the values of participation, learning, negotiation, and flexibility (Cooper, 2017). It created a richer pool of human resources and capacities for future evaluation projects and enriched the evaluation data and process. Some of the major challenges included planning for the time and resources and ensuring engagement across all phases of the evaluation. The list of recommendations that can be accompanied by the participatory evaluation checklist developed by PAN may be useful to other teams considering this approach (PAN, 2018).

REFERENCES

AHA Centre. (2018). *AHA centre fact sheet: Capacity bridging*. http://www.ahacentre.ca/uploads/9/6/4/2/96422574/capacity_bridging_-_finaljune_2018.pdf

Chouinard, J. A., & Cousins, J. B. (2015). The journey from rhetoric to reality: Participatory evaluation in a development context. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, *27*(1), 5–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-013-9184-8

Cooper, S. (2017). *Participatory evaluation in youth and community work: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Cousins, J. (2003). Utilization effects of participatory evaluation. In T. Kellaghan & D. L. Stufflebeam (Eds.), *International handbook of educational evaluation: Part one: Perspectives / Part two: Practice* (pp. 245-265). Springer. www.springer.com/gp/book/9781402008498

Cousins, J. B., & Chouinard, J. A. (2012). *Participatory evaluation up close: An integration of research-based knowledge*. IAP.

Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (1998). Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, *1998*(80), 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1114

Duddy, J. (2017). *Peer evaluator training manual*. Pacific AIDS Network. https://pacificaidsnetwork.org/files/2017/04/PEEREVALUATORTRAININGPROGRAM-FINAL-APRIL-2017-Merged.pdf

Estrella, M., Blauert, J., Gonsalves, J., Campilan, D., Gaventa, J., Guijt, I., . . . Ricafort, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Learning from change: Issues and experiences in participatory monitoring and evaluation*. International Development Research Centre.

Fawcett, S. B., Boothroyd, R., Schultz, J. A., Francisco, V. T., Carson, V., & Bremby, R. (2003). Building capacity for participatory evaluation within community initiatives. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, *26*(2), 21–36. https://doi.org/10.1300/J005v26n02_03

Guta, A., Flicker, S., & Roche, B. (2013). Governing through community allegiance: A qualitative examination of peer research in community-based participatory research. *Critical Public Health*, *23*(4), 432–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2012.761675. Medline:24273389

King, J. A., Cousins, J. B., & Whitmore, E. (2007). Making sense of participatory evaluation: Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, *2007*(114), 83–105. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.226

MacKinnon, S. (2018). *Practising community-based participatory research: Stories of engagement, empowerment, and mobilization*. Purich Books.

McIvor (Vlahaki), E. (2017). *Meta evaluation: Positive leadership development institute impact evaluation*. Pacific AIDS Network. https://pacificaidsnetwork.org/files/2018/01/Final-PLDI-Meta-Evaluation-Report-Midpoint-and-Project-End-FINAL.pdf

Pacific AIDS Network (PAN). (2018). *PAN's checklist: What do you need to have in place in order to be successful using a participatory evaluation approach?* https://pacificaidsnetwork.org/files/2018/11/Participatory-approach-to-evaluation-CESBC-2018-Checklist-4.0.pdf

Rhodes, S. D., Vissman, A. T., Stowers, J., Miller, C., McCoy, T. P., Hergenrather, K. C., . . . Eng, E. (2011). A CBPR partnership increases HIV testing among men who have sex with men (MSM): Outcome findings from a pilot test of the *CyBER/testing* internet intervention. *Health Education & Behavior*, *38*(3), 311–320. https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198110379572. Medline:21393625

Rice, M., & Franceschini, M. C. (2007). Lessons learned from the application of a partici-
patory evaluation methodology to Healthy Municipalities, Cities and Communities
initiatives in selected countries of the Americas. *Promotion & Education*, *14*(2), 68–73.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1025382307014002150l. Medline:17665701

Smits, P. A., & Champagne, F. (2008). An assessment of the theoretical underpinnings of
practical participatory evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *29*(4), 427–442.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214008325023

Souleymanov, R., Kuzmanović, D., Marshall, Z., Scheim, A. I., Mikiki, M., Worthington,
C., & Millson, M. (2016). The ethics of community-based research with people who
use drugs: Results of a scoping review. *BMC Medical Ethics*, *17*(1), 25. https://doi.
org/10.1186/s12910-016-0108-2. Medline:27129927

Suarez-Balcazar, Y., & Harper, G. (2014). *Empowerment and participatory evalua-
tion of community interventions: Multiple benefits*. Routledge. https://doi.org/
10.4324/9781315808703

Torres, R. T., Stone, S. P., Butkus, D. L., Hook, B. B., Casey, J., & Arens, S. A. (2000). Dia-
logue and reflection in a collaborative evaluation: Stakeholder and evaluator voices.
New Directions for Evaluation, *85*, 27. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1159

Zukoski, A. P., Bosserman, C., & Baechler, C. (2018). Essentials of participatory evaluation.
In D. M. Fetterman, L. Rodríguez-Campos, A. P. Zukoski, & Contributors (Eds.),
*Collaborative, participatory, and empowerment evaluation: Stakeholder involvement
approaches*. The Guilford Press.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Janice Duddy is the director of evaluation and research at the Pacific AIDS Network
(PAN), a position supported by REACH Nexus. Her expertise is in engaging communi-
ties and people with lived and living experiences in research and evaluation projects
and supporting successful participatory evaluation and community-based research
projects, primarily with a focus on health equity, implementation science, and inter-
secting identities.

Mona Lee has over eight years of experience in evaluation and research. She currently
serves as a multi-country evaluation specialist at UNICEF, and previously as an evaluation
manager at the Pacific AIDS Network. Her research interests include HIV and nutrition,
as well as child rights and health in the context of international development and humani-
tarian situations.

Elayne McIvor is the principal of Catalyst Consulting, where she works alongside organi-
zations to help them chart their course, realize their goals, and measure their impact. Her
current research interests include strategic learning, systems change, and health equity.

Paul Kerber is the evaluation coordinator at the Pacific AIDS Network (PAN). He works
on a diverse group of evaluation projects in British Columbia and across Canada. He has
strong interest in evaluation and research projects on HIV, stigma, and health care.

Alfiya Battalova is evaluation manager at the Pacific AIDS Network with background
in academic and community-based settings. Her research interests include health equity
and advocacy, qualitative and participatory methods, and the intersection of disability
and health.