Participatory Analysis

Expanding Stakeholder Involvement in Evaluation

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What are the best ways to involve stakeholders in an evaluation? Are there opportunities for participation in evaluation that could be made more widely available?

Over the past year, Innovation Network has begun to use **participatory data analysis** as part of our overall **participatory evaluation** approach (see sidebar). This paper offers brief case studies examining the use of participatory analysis with three different organizations: The Congressional Hunger Center, Washington Area Women's Foundation, and ACTION (Advocacy to Control Tuberculosis Internationally). Each case study includes a description of the purpose of the participatory analysis; the design, planning, and implementation process; and the effect on the overall evaluation. The paper concludes with tips for getting started with participatory analysis.

Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation is not new: It has philosophical and social roots going back at least to the 1960s, and began to gather momentum as an evaluation approach in the late 1980s.* Participatory evaluation involves engaging a program's stakeholders in the evaluation process—making them active participants, rather than passive subjects.

In the early years of Innovation Network's evaluation practice, we found that many nonprofits viewed evaluation as a punitive process that is "done to" them. We adopted participatory approaches to help change that perception—to draw on the wisdom of the people implementing the programs, and to make evaluation an opportunity for learning.

Benefits of participatory approaches include:

- Informing the evaluation planning process with multiple insider perspectives;
- Ensuring mutual understanding between the evaluation team and the program stakeholders of the program's intended goals, strategies, and desired outcomes—and the purpose of the evaluation process.
- Making evaluation results more useful for communications, fundraising, and program improvement.

* For an overview of participatory evaluation's origins, see "The History of Participatory Evaluation and Current Debates in the Field," by Sharon Brisolara, published in the Winter 1998 edition of *New Directions for Evaluation*.

Why We Began Using Participatory Analysis

Innovation Network has been a longtime proponent of participatory evaluation. The vast majority of our evaluation consulting engagements since 1992 have used a participatory approach. However, we recently realized that much of the "participatory-ness" of our evaluation projects was limited to the evaluation planning stage. Sometimes stakeholders would continue to be involved in implementing the evaluation—offering input on data collection instruments, for example, or being active participants in data collection. However, we felt that other opportunities for participation were being overlooked.

How We Use Participatory Analysis

To fill this participation gap, we began involving stakeholders in the **analysis and interpretation** of the data, rather than simply offering a final evaluation report with findings and recommendations drawn from our analysis. Participatory data analysis can be used to:

- Present first drafts of data and/or findings, giving stakeholders the chance to provide context and input on findings or recommendations;
- Help sustain stakeholder interest and engagement in the evaluation process;
- Identify which findings and recommendations are the most meaningful to stakeholders; and
- Increase the likelihood that findings and recommendations will be put to practical use.

Participatory analysis can take many forms, but generally is prepared for and facilitated by the evaluator. The evaluator develops the agenda and prepares presentation materials that will elicit constructive discussion. The following case studies illustrate three different approaches we have used.

Case Study:

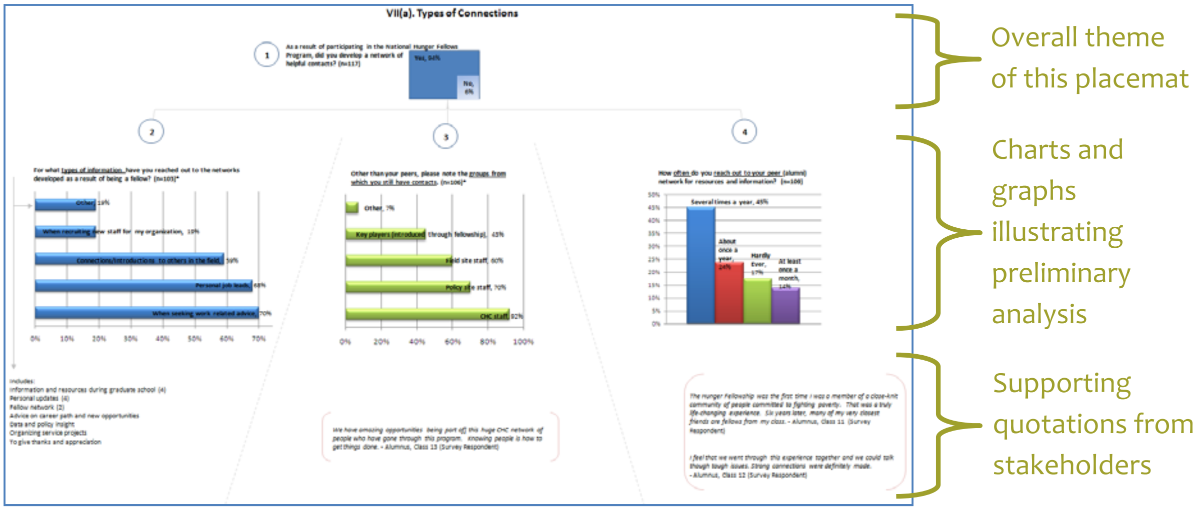
Congressional Hunger Center—Data Placemats for Improved Reporting

The Congressional Hunger Center is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization. Its mission is to train and inspire leaders who work to end hunger and to advocate for public policies that create a food-secure world. Innovation Network partnered with the Congressional Hunger Center to evaluate its Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows Program. The evaluation sought to assess:

- Impact on the educational and career objectives of participants;
- Participants' understanding of the connections between hunger, poverty, and racism;
- Effect of professional connections made during the fellowship;
- Benefits to the operations of placement organizations and communities (where fellows worked);
- Overall quality and utility of the training portion of the program;
- Quality of the support provided to fellows by Emerson Hunger Fellows staff.

We collected evaluation data through a survey of past Emerson Hunger Fellows, and by interviewing key informants such as program staff, program alumni, site supervisors from the placement organizations, and members of the Congressional Hunger Center's Board of Directors. To prepare for the participatory analysis meeting, we synthesized and organized the data into topic areas emerging from preliminary analysis and related to the evaluation's goals. We chose to present the preliminary data as a series of "data placemats"—large sheets of paper displaying thematically grouped data. Each placemat presented data through charts, graphs, and quotes, displayed in a visually pleasing, easy-to-follow format. While the purpose of the placemat is to allow stakeholders to independently ponder and analyze the data, it is up to the evaluator to decide which data will be included, and how to effectively organize and display them.

Figure 1: Anatomy of a Data Placemat



The three-hour participatory analysis meeting was attended by the evaluators and the two co-directors of the Emerson Hunger Fellows program. The objective of the meeting was to elicit stakeholder feedback by presenting the preliminary data using the eleven placemats. The evaluators guided stakeholder discussion using three questions:

- What surprises you about the data?
- What factors may explain some of the trends we are seeing?
- Does this lead you to new questions?

As a result of the participatory analysis meeting, the quality of evaluation findings and recommendations was strengthened, stakeholder buy-in for findings/recommendations was increased, and the likelihood of evaluation use improved. By involving stakeholders in analysis, the evaluators better understood the context and therefore the meaning of the data, resulting in added nuance and richness of the final evaluation report. We were pleased to hear that Congressional Hunger Center staff has used the report as an advocacy tool on Capitol Hill.

Lessons Learned

Improved Reporting: The participatory analysis approach using data placemats led to a more comprehensive, detailed report that told a more accurate story of program implementation and impact—more so than if stakeholders had not engaged in the participatory analysis. The approach also simplified the development of the final report: Evaluators and stakeholders had discussed and agreed to findings, preliminary data visualizations had already been created for the placemats, and fewer drafts were exchanged between evaluators and stakeholders.

Visual Presentation of Data: When designing data communication tools, such as the data placemats, it is important that the evaluator communicates information in a clear, user-friendly way that best portrays the data. The evaluator should provide an unbiased analysis of key data, organized by evaluation question, outcome, or other topic. When appropriate, charts, graphs, and other visualizations should be used to increase the ability of stakeholders to understand relationships among the data. Careful attention to visual design helps stakeholders to easily understand the data, paving the way for rich conversation.

Effect on Project Scope: Though participatory analysis simplifies some aspects of the evaluation process, it is not without cost. Preparation for participatory analysis takes time, and necessitates the creation of an additional product—the data placemats (or other presentation materials). The time that it takes to engage in participatory analysis—performing the preliminary data analysis, creating the visualization-intensive placemats, and conducting the analysis with stakeholders—should be included in the evaluation project workload estimate.

Case Study:

Washington Area Women's Foundation—Setting Realistic Expectations and Increasing Support with Stakeholders

Washington Area Women's Foundation is a regional foundation that seeks to improve the lives of women and girls in the D.C. area through leveraging women's philanthropy and providing grants to local organizations. Innovation Network partnered with the Washington Area Women's Foundation on a five-year evaluation of the Stepping Stones Initiative, a multi-year effort designed to build the long-term economic security and financial independence of female-headed households in the D.C. metropolitan area. The evaluation tracked progress made on initiative outcomes across multiple grantee projects.

In the first four years of the project, a traditional evaluation report was submitted with minimal analysis discussion. After staffing changes on both the evaluation side and at the Foundation, we opted for a new approach to keep the evaluation stakeholders engaged with the evaluation process.

In the fifth year of the Stepping Stones project, a participatory analysis meeting was held in preparation for creating the year-end report. The evaluation team collected data from grantee reports, media scans, and program participant interviews. The team then compiled and analyzed data in preliminary thematic categories, with the purpose of presenting the data in a comprehensible but unbiased fashion. The format of the participatory analysis meeting was a visual slideshow of the data, formatted into charts and graphs, accompanied by facilitated discussion.

This format provided the space for open sharing of feedback, and resulted in:

- Increased clarity about the influence of economic and political factors on the data;
- Improved stakeholder understanding of the data and its limitations, and what findings could realistically be drawn from the data;
- Buy-in and support for findings and recommendations;
- Simplified production of the final report;
- Improved evaluator-stakeholder communications and relationship; and
- Improved stakeholder confidence in using the data for reporting and fundraising.

Lessons Learned

Reasonable Expectations: The participatory analysis meeting increased stakeholder understanding about which conclusions could realistically be drawn from the data, setting reasonable expectations that led to more support for the findings and recommendations contained in the final report. Including stakeholders in the analysis phase reinforced to them that their perspective was vital to understanding the data, and that the evaluator does not have the last word.

Stakeholder Support: The process also revitalized stakeholder support for the evaluation, which was crucial as the project was in its fifth year and had experienced significant staff turnover. In year five, not a single person remained who had been involved in the initial design and implementation of the evaluation project in year one. The participatory analysis process fostered engagement and understanding that may not have been present otherwise.

Case Study:

ACTION—The Importance of Who is at the Table

ACTION (Advocacy to Control Tuberculosis Internationally) is a global partnership working to bring additional funding resources and attention to the fight against tuberculosis. ACTION uses what it calls an "inside/outside" advocacy approach—its strategies are targeted "inside" (i.e., within governments and institutions) and "outside" (i.e., in the field) to achieve maximum effect.[1]

ACTION uses an internal evaluation system to track outputs, such as the amount of media generated, number of citizen advocates mobilized, and amount of outreach to decision makers. It also partners with external evaluators to conduct third-party evaluations. In 2010 for a grant midterm evaluation, ACTION partnered with Innovation Network on an evaluation for the dual purpose of accountability and learning.

[1]For more on ACTION's internal/external advocacy, visit http://www.action.org/site/publications/best_practices

The evaluation addressed five evaluation questions:

- What progress has been made toward national-level advocacy goals?
- What progress has been made toward multilateral advocacy goals?
- What advocacy capacity has been built? Is it sustainable?
- What is unique and valuable about ACTION's model?
- Where/how else can ACTION play a role/add value?

The evaluation team collected data through a variety of methods, including:

- A survey of ACTION partner staff in all country offices: the U.S., U.K., Kenya, Japan, France, Australia, Canada, and India;
- Key informant interviews with 35 internal and external stakeholders including program staff, outside partners, and technical experts;
- Focus groups with the Secretariat staff, country campaign staff, and an intense period debrief[2] with Secretariat staff after ACTION's annual meeting and conference campaign period; and
- Document review.

In contrast to the two preceding case studies—for which the majority of data was quantitative and thus easily represented using charts and graphs—the ACTION evaluation project collected mostly open-ended survey and interview data. Since charts and graphs were less useful in this case, the evaluators decided to draft preliminary findings organized by the evaluation questions listed above. Each preliminary finding was supported by verbatim quotes taken from survey data and interview/focus group transcripts. In contrast to the preceding two case studies (in which findings were co-developed with stakeholders based on the data), the purpose of the participatory analysis meeting with ACTION staff was to solicit stakeholder feedback on preliminary findings and gather input into recommendations.

Careful attention was given to selecting the right stakeholders to attend the meeting. While a broad pool of stakeholders was involved in contributing to the design of the evaluation (e.g., developing evaluation questions and identifying interviewees), it was acknowledged that a smaller group was needed to provide strategic review. Seven ACTION project staff members, representing a breadth and depth of organizational knowledge and skills, were selected to engage in the participatory analysis process. The participant list was finalized through conversations between the evaluators and the primary contact of the ACTION project.

[2] The Intense Period Debrief is a data collection methodology developed by Innovation Network specifically for advocacy evaluation. Learn more at http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/File/advocacy/intense_period_debrief.pdf

In the first meeting (90 minutes in length), the evaluators presented each finding accompanied by the supporting quotes. A slideshow presentation was used to display the findings, participants were each given a hard copy of the full findings, and table cards reminded participants of the guiding questions for the meeting. The three questions used to guide discussion were:

- How does this information align with your experience and perceptions?
- What doesn't fit? How?
- Where would you add context to clarify or explain the findings?

In the second meeting (60 minutes in length), the conversation focused on recommendations. The evaluators presented recommendations gleaned from the data, and participants were asked to reflect on which recommendations were most relevant to ACTION's continuing work considering its priorities and resources. The evaluators believed that the final recommendations developed through the participatory process were more relevant, useful, and actionable than otherwise would have been generated.

ACTION staff input resulted in the creation of recommendations relevant to nascent strategies and priorities—developments so new that they were not included within the scope of the evaluation and would have otherwise been overlooked by the evaluators. For example, one finding spoke to the power of an ACTION representative occupying a Board of Directors seat at the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (one of the multilateral bodies targeted by ACTION advocacy). What the evaluation did not capture was that the Director term was nearly complete, and the ACTION representative would rotate off of the Board in a matter of months. When presented with the finding regarding the power of the Director position, ACTION staff were not surprised—they had already begun to think about the issue. In the participatory analysis meeting, staff applied their deeper contextual knowledge to the finding, noted that the term was nearly complete, and voiced a recommendation that a similar position should be sought with another organization targeted by ACTION advocacy.

Lessons Learned

Choose the Right Participants: Part of the art of the participatory analysis approach is deciding *who is at the table*. ACTION is a big partnership with nearly 60 staff internationally, from nine formal international partners. They are a busy, dynamic group spread across multiple time zones. For the meeting to be successful, participants needed to be able to have a conversation of depth (as opposed to breadth), and needed to be in action/decision making positions capable of speaking for the organization. Having a representative mix of stakeholders who could make high-level, partnership-wide recommendations was extremely valuable.

Budget Appropriate Resources: Participatory analysis is time consuming: time to conduct the preliminary analysis, to prepare the data communication tools, to plan for the presentation, and to conduct the meeting. These meetings can also be quite intense, requiring skilled facilitation. Depending on how much information there is to present, it may be preferable to split the session across two days—for example, a day to review findings, and a second day to firm up recommendations.

Participatory Analysis: Getting Started

Participatory analysis is a valuable tool in the evaluator's toolbox, but like a hammer, it isn't the right tool in every situation. In determining whether participatory analysis may be a good fit for your evaluation needs, consider the following questions:

1. Quality: How might participatory analysis improve the quality of findings/recommendations?
2. Stakeholders: What might be the positive outcomes of engaging evaluation stakeholders?
3. Timeline & Resources: Will the participatory analysis approach fit within the project timeline and available resources?

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