Community-Based Research with Policy Impact

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Speaking Notes
October 17, 2006
Focus

• So what?
  – CBR yields valuable and interesting insight on community life
  – how can these findings affect policy and broader social change?

• Now what?
  – you’ve done some good CBR
  – how do you ensure it has an impact with policy makers?
Think of Policy Potential from the Start

• build assessing the potential policy implications of the issue you are researching into planning from the start
• for example, if you are assessing the health care and social service needs of a particular community
  – you may have identified unmet needs or gaps or barriers in existing services
  – these are policy issues – what kinds of programmes or resources are needed to meet the unmet needs? how can the gaps in existing services be filled? who will fund them?
  – you may even find that existing policies and programmes are the real problem that needs solving
• build these kinds of questions into your research design
Know your Policy Environment

• to be able to build policy potential into your research planning, you need to know:
  – the policy framework for your particular issue
    • e.g. which govts, and which Ministries or depts govern your issue?
    • what are the main formal policies that shape your area?
    • just as impt – what are the unstated assumptions and constraints that shape the sphere?
    • trends in govt funding in the area?
  – some general facets of how policy is developed and changed within governments – players, processes and constraints
  – and some specific aspects of the government of the day:
    • how does your issue relate to its overall agenda?
    • where is it in the electoral cycle?
• You’ve done research that has clear policy implications
• What needs to happen to get govts to act on the research & evidence you have found?

1. policy makers need to know about the research and its implications – knowledge exchange strategy for all CBR projects
2. policy makers need to understand the basis of the problem – which means CBR reports have to clearly set out the policy implications of their findings
3. they need to have concrete policy solutions or alternatives that will address whatever the problem is – the more policy-ready recommendations you can provide them, the better
4. they need the political will to act – often beyond the power of individual CBR projects → where alliances and coalitions come in
Ensuring your research has impact: knowledge exchange

- lots of good tools and material on developing a knowledge exchange strategy – Cdn Health Services Research Foundation
- Key principles include:
  - identifying who needs to know about your results – includes who can act on the findings or who can build support for action
  - know your audience
  - design your roll-out and KE strategy specifically for each audience
  - have to write results up in clear and accessible language
  - but putting them up on Web or sending a report to a few people won’t be enough, also need to do systematic outreach to get results to key stakeholders
KE for policy makers

• know the policy environment and way of thinking within govts
• customize reports for policy audiences
  – separate/short policy implications summaries
  – translate into terms they understand and with concrete recommendations they can act on
  – e.g. always address cost benefits, risk management, options and other factors that govt policy makers think about
• systematic outreach and follow up with policy makers
  – identify people who could be making the decisions – audience again
  – get findings & policy implications to them
  – as part of long-term strategy to build relationships with key policy makers in your spheres
CBR → ‘policy-ready’

• to get your findings to the intended policy audiences – in ways they can understand and use – always involves translation
• partially this is cultural
  – into the very different languages and mind sets of govts
  – into ‘policy speak’
• partially this is very concrete – translating your findings into:
  – specific actionable policy options and recommendations
  – that will work in the existing policy environment
  – couched in the formats – cabinet briefing notes – and frameworks – cost-benefit analysis and risk management – that govts use
• the more policy ready → the more chance for influence
Examples of CBR into Action

• two examples that Wellesley has worked with concretely illustrate the points I have been making
• can get links to their reports, press coverage and other material on our site at
  http://wellesleyinstitute.com/research
Street Health: CBR on ODCSP

- found that large numbers of the homeless people they worked with were disabled
- but they were not receiving ODSP – why not?
- the research uncovered administrative, programme and other systemic barriers to homeless people getting benefits to which they are entitled
- also pioneered a model of support workers who helped homeless people through the maze of applying for ODSP – highly successful in securing access
in terms of the points I have been emphasizing:
  – the research identified concrete barriers and problems
  – and their analysis showed ways that these barriers could be fixed
  – they translated those findings:
    • into policy speak, with cost benefit analysis
    • and concrete and actionable policy and programme recommendations – including which govt bodies would need to act on what and how

• they worked with ODSP and other govt people from the start
• they identified target govt and media audiences for their findings
• they are undertaking sustained outreach to get their recommendations taken up
Count Us In

- Ontario Women’s Health Network, Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, Toronto Public Health and other partners
- project was on barriers homeless and marginalized women face in access to crucial health and social services
- also developed a new way of doing research
- inclusion research trains, supports and involves homeless and other marginalized women in doing the research themselves
- a form of peer-driven research that effectively uncovers nuanced and rich understanding
• this project also identified policy barriers and issues and the govt agencies that needed to act on their findings, and developed and promoted specific policy recommendations

• but this research also came at a particularly interesting time in health reform in Ontario and illustrates two further vital points:
  – to be aware of the strategic environment surrounding your particular issue and look for opportunities to promote your research and overall perspective
  – be ready to seize these opportunities when the arise
Look for Opportunities

- LHINs have all been emphasizing community engagement in their initial planning and priority setting
- the province is developing a new strategic plan for health and extensive community engagement is crucial to it
- both see including marginalized, poor and those diverse voices who are seldom heard in policy deliberations as a critical challenge
- inclusion research – and its underlying principles of involving marginalized communities directly in defining their own experience – can be an important tool in meeting this challenge
Seizing Opportunities

• sustained and targeted outreach:
  – the Inclusion Research Team met with Toronto Central LHIN and prepared a backgrounder for them
  – met with staff of Central LHIN
  – discussed backgrounder with top MOHLTC officials

• role for Wellesley =
  – help in translating for policy environment
  – using contacts to broker meetings and put backgrounder around in key circles
  – emphasized potential of inclusion research, other CBR and community-based partners in discussion on community engagement for new strategic plan

• increasing emphasis on community engagement has opened space for pushing innovative community-driven methods and perspectives
Challenges

• we need to pay attention to both:
  – effectively pushing findings and recommendations out to policy makers that can act on them
  – also pull factors – ensuring that CBR results are taken seriously within govt and other policy making circles

• the opportunity or opening here is that all govts emphasize research or evidence driven policy making

• the challenge is to promote CBR as a rigorous and reliable – and in some cases the best -- way to get solid evidence on complex social issues
CBR as solid and reliable evidence

• there are prejudices to be overcome:
  – CBR doesn't provide ‘hard data’, ‘lived experience’ is of little policy relevance
  – the best way to do this is to continue to do solid research and to show concretely its implications for policy makers
  – and to build long-term working relationships with policy makers

• a very good ‘outcome’ of the examples I mentioned earlier would be that these CBR practitioners – and others like them – come to be seen as critical stakeholders who can advise governments on community engagement with the most marginalized and on social policy that works in those communities
Further challenges

• while there has been increasing recognition within universities and govts of the importance of knowledge mobilization, this has seldom highlighted CBR
• the community partners involved in CBR seldom have the time or resources to develop systematic KE and outreach strategies
• there is lots of good CBR and front-line service delivery and community building innovations going on across the country – but there really isn’t a forum or infrastructure to share them
• is there a need for a clearinghouse function or forum for CBR?
Think Partnerships

- policy analysis is a specialized – and often arcane – trade
- it isn’t effective to try to learn it all for yourself
- who can help:
  - get experienced policy people on advisory team early on
  - even better, get Ministry, dept or other officials in the area involved from the start – get them to help define the questions they need answered
  - get advice on policy analysis or the environment for your issue – one source is service provider or professional associations
Wellesley Institute Role

- working with our research partners we can:
  - provide advice on policy implications and environment from design stage onwards
  - help in translation of findings into policy ready analyses and options/recommendations
  - help to broker contact with appropriate officials and stakeholders
  - promote the CBR in the wider policy circles in which we work
- we have done this kind of work with a number of projects we have funded
  - but we’re also happy to advise other CBR projects as well
- our capacity building workshop series also has a stream focusing on exactly this problem of translating results into policy alternatives, knowledge exchange, policy advocacy and effective presentation to policy makers
Conclusion

• strategic environment for CBR has some promise:
  – govt and other policy stakeholders increasingly – if unevenly -- see CBR as valuable method
  – emphasis on community engagement has created more space for community-driven methods

• many challenges remain, but opportunity to work together to:
  – synthesize and build on insights and knowledge from CBR going on in many settings
  – translate these insights into policy terms and workable policy alternatives – which does mean a change in approach for some CBR practitioners
  – tie this research into wider campaigns and alliances for social change