

The last Data Brief of each month will address approaches to collecting and analyzing data with our community agencies. This Brief introduces the reader to an evaluation process which aims to empower communities to solve problems and make decisions on issues that directly affect them. The approach we use is “emergent” and “empowering,” meaning that it takes into account the diversity of value perspectives of constituent groups. However, it is through this approach—*resolana*—that we invite participation and examination of issues that concern all stakeholders.

### EMERGENT EVALUATION

The approach we use for this evaluation approach is *emergent* and *empowering*. It is characterized as *emergent* or *cascading* because the design cannot be fully articulated except in general terms inasmuch as each step in the process is determined, at least in part, by what has emerged prior to that point. Thus data collection is primarily qualitative: document analysis, interviews, participant observation and community dialogues or *resolanas*. These methods are used to determine the truth-value (the responsive equivalent to validity) and utility in shaping the direction of the project.

In this design, evaluation evolves as our knowledge of the issues and understanding of the agency's programs expands. We do not have a preconceived notion of where our analyses will lead us, and we expect to continuously amend both our approach and perspective on issues. This *emergent* design is based partly on Guba and Lincoln's (1982) naturalistic approach to inquiry, which emphasizes the inductive development of theory grounded in data. This is in keeping with what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as *thick description*, in which program assessment, interview notes, document analysis and case studies collectively provide an in-depth portrayal of issues that lead to an intuitive understanding of the topic. In effect, *thick description* depicts the gestalt of the issues surrounding the agency's concerns.

### EMPOWERMENT EVALUATION

The theoretical basis for evaluation is a concept known as *empowerment* evaluation—the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. It employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, and its primary focus is on programs, both in the contexts of process and outcome. With respect to process, *empowerment* evaluations are directed toward such issues as gaining control of programs, obtaining resources necessary to drive program development and delivery, and obtaining a critical understanding of the social environment that

helps stakeholders become independent problem solvers and decision-makers.

Evolving perspectives of stakeholders, environmental and social changes, knowledge about program goals and practice and other factors that implicate the program are dynamic functions. By internalizing and institutionalizing self-evaluation processes and practices, a dynamic responsive approach to evaluation can be developed that will be sensitive to those shifts. Stakeholders in the program continually assess their progress toward self-determined goals and continuously reshape their plans and strategies according to this assessment.

### RESOLANA

By necessity, *empowerment* evaluation is a collaborative group activity, not an individual pursuit. Fundamentally, then, *empowerment* evaluation is a democratic and dynamic process. It is *resolana*, however, that invites—indeed, demands—participation and examination of issues of concern to all stakeholders. A *resolana* is a dialogue and more. It involves the sharing of myths or stories about our lives helping us understand who we are and where we belong (our sense of community). These stories are “self interpretation of our inner selves in relation to the outside world.” If our actions are to have meaning they must be in the context of our personal experience. *Resolana* allows us to think for ourselves, to see the world with clarity, and to keep indoctrination, propaganda, commercialism and self-interest from dictating our view of the world.

Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration, *empowerment* evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the *empowerment* evaluation process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external evaluation, and its aim is toward the documentation and achievement of outcomes and impacts.

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