Participatory to the End: Planning and Implementation of a Participatory Evaluation Strategy

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A MAJOR PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

(Urban Planning)

Faculty of Environmental Studies
York University, Toronto

December 6, 2010

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Abstract

The paper explores participatory evaluation as a viable option for evaluating participatory processes. Participatory evaluation aims to actively engage diverse program stakeholders at various stages and tasks of the evaluation process. Considerable literature has been published on the promises that stakeholder participation in evaluation holds for increasing the use of evaluation findings, supporting organizational learning and stakeholder empowerment. However, not all contexts are conducive to the successful implementation of participatory evaluation or to maximizing its potential. The paper discusses these opportunities and challenges in the case of Toronto Community Housing where a set of tenants and staff, with the help of external facilitators, engaged in an evaluation of the organization's participatory budgeting process. The paper draws from this grounded experience to explore the meaning of stakeholder participation in evaluations, how participation can lead to credible findings, and what impact participatory evaluation has on participants, the organization, as well as the participatory program. Data was gathered to assess how the approach was viewed through the eyes of evaluation sponsors, participants and external evaluators. The paper ends with recommendations regarding the types of circumstances that may best support the participatory evaluation approach as well as strategies practitioners can adopt to ensure its successful implementation in the context of participatory processes.

Foreword

The paper is the final deliverable for my final Plan of Study, which focuses on the relationship between three principal components: participatory democracy, planning and transformative development. Through course work and field experience I aimed to explore the relationship between participatory democracy and planning in order to better understand planning approaches that not only raise material standards, but also facilitate social learning, capacity building and empowerment. The research focus of the paper allowed me to further the theoretical and empirical investigation of this area of concentration. The paper discusses a case application of participatory evaluation in the context of the participatory budgeting program at Toronto Community Housing. As one of the facilitators of the evaluation, I was able to assess how evaluation practice can be an effective means of exploring: what impact participatory processes are really having, whom they are benefiting and how best to improve their design to meet set objectives. Moreover, the participatory methodology of the evaluation allowed me to learn not only about participation *in* planning, but also how to plan *for* participation that offers transformative benefits for its participants such as capacity building and increased ownership over the evaluation process.

Acknowledgements

The following research project would not have been possible without Josh Lerner, a teacher, mentor and friend. Thank you for believing in me, and expanding my realm of the possible.

I would also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Prof. Liette Gilbert, Prof. Ute Lehrer and Prof. Bonnie Kettel for their support and unyielding patience.

To my dearest friends Siham Rayale and Nausheen Quayyum for never letting me walk alone. To my planning crew: Jed, Matt and Penny for shedding light on the journey.

To the tenant researchers and staff at Toronto Community Housing for facilitating and participating in such a wonderful project.

To Mama, Papi and Olek, my eternal cheerleaders and to whom I dedicate all my accomplishments.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the Faculty of Environmental Studies for facilitating the creative space I needed to grow.

As the saying goes, it takes a village…

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Introduction

How do we build a society that better reflects its citizens' values and cares for their needs? Public participation processes are one way to involve people and meaningfully impact governance. Indeed, the last few decades have seen a revitalized interest around the globe in increasing citizen involvement in politics. There has been a demand on the part of grassroots movements for meaningful involvement in decision-making beyond the ballot box and some large-scale institutions, national and local governments have responded with greater participation in their political processes and governance structures. But in the same way that public participation can be a force for increasing equity, it can be co-opted and used in ways that are detrimental to communities (Arnstein, 1969). Thus at this historical juncture, we need to ask ourselves: how can we determine what impact participatory processes are really having and judge if and for whom they are beneficial? How can we improve them so that they achieve desired and intended outcomes? Such questions require us to think critically and reflectively about participatory endeavors and be willing to honestly evaluate them.

Indeed, the practice of evaluation has been identified as an effective means of exploring what impact participatory processes are really having, whom they are benefiting and how best to improve process design to meet the set objectives of the process. Evaluations can also serve communities to better understand, and demand accountability from, engagement initiatives that purport to meet their needs and aspirations. In addition, evaluations can help demonstrate the value of participation and win support for participatory programs. Nonetheless, while there is a growing interest in the topic of evaluation, it has been scantly addressed in the literature, and widely ignored in the design of public participation processes. Moreover, the question of "how to evaluate?" remains to be explored. The following paper aims to contribute to this discussion by investigating the potential contributions participatory evaluation can make to participatory processes.

Participatory evaluation is an approach that aims to democratize the evaluation process by meaningfully involving stakeholders in studies of the programs in which they participate (King, 2005). Proponents of the model argue that the approach not only expands the normative objectives of democratic participation into the realm of evaluation, it can also increase evaluation use and build stakeholder learning and capacity in various areas, including evaluation and research. What is more, participation in the process of inquiry can potentially

empower disenfranchised groups with influence over decision-making. The following paper examines in the context of a case study how participatory evaluation works in practice to identify some of the opportunities and challenges the approach presents to the evaluation of participatory processes. The goal is not necessarily to prove if participatory evaluation is right or wrong, but to better understand its impact as well as identify strategies and enabling conditions that make it more likely to succeed.

Case Study and Research Questions

The present study looks at the particular application of participatory evaluation in the context of the public social housing organization, Toronto Community Housing[1]. As the second largest social housing provider in North America, the organization has made tenant engagement an important component of its governance model in order to ground decisions in the needs of local communities and empower tenants in the process (Toronto Community Housing, 2009). One of the "driving forces" of this strategy is the participatory budgeting process (Staff D, 2010). Participatory budgeting is a governance model widely adopted across the globe that allows the participation of ordinary citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances (Sintomer et al., 2008). The approach was introduced to Toronto Community Housing to give tenants decision-making power over funding priorities for capital expenditures (Lerner and Wagner, 2006). Every year, for a period of around 5 months, staff engages tenants in a multi-level process of participation and deliberation to decide on the distribution of capital funds (up to 9 million) to local priorities.[2]

In 2009 and 2010, Toronto Community Housing hired two external facilitators, including myself, to work with stakeholders (i.e. tenants and staff) on a formative evaluation of their participatory budgeting process. In particular, 13 tenants each year were actively involved in all aspects of the evaluation process from planning to implementation, to the collection of data, to the analysis and drawing of conclusions and recommendations. The evaluation aimed at providing stakeholders with the opportunity to reflect and better understand participatory budgeting in the hopes, that this in turn, would support better design and management of the participatory process, as well as build the capacity of stakeholders to conduct evaluations in the future.

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[1] The name of Toronto Community Housing is used in the paper with their permission.
[2] For more information on the participatory budgeting process at Toronto Community Housing, see Lerner and Wagner, 2006; Lerner, 2006.

The context of the study as well as participatory nature of the program provided an ideal opportunity to explore not only participatory evaluation but also its viability as an approach to evaluating participatory processes, particularly in the context of public institutions. For this purpose, the paper draws on the literature and examines the process and outcomes of the case example to answer the following guiding questions:

(1) How did the participatory evaluation foster and manage stakeholder participation?

(2) How did the process ensure that stakeholder participation produced "useful" findings and recommendations?

(3) What were the effects of the participatory model on program changes, organizational learning and the development of evaluation skills by the participants?

(4) What can the experience tell us about the role of facilitators, participants and supporting organizations in the actual practice of participatory evaluation?

These questions provide the framework to explore the effects of the participatory evaluation process, factors that contribute to meaningful participation and the conditions that need to be in place to maximize the potential of the approach.

Methods for Evaluating the Evaluation

The analysis is conducted at a meta-level: an evaluation of an evaluation. For this purpose, a thorough review of empirical and theoretical literature on participatory evaluation was carried out to critically analyze core aspects of this participatory practice as well as ongoing debates in the field. The literature is brought forward in the paper to interpret and draw out potential explanations for data emerging from my participant observation and structured interviews with participating tenants and staff. These methods of qualitative research were understood as the most appropriate for the proposed research as it allows more open and detailed data collection, particularly in relation to valuable experiential aspects and interactions un-measurable via quantitative tools.

The paper focuses primarily on the 2010 evaluation because it entailed deeper stakeholder participation. Having said that, it will incorporate lessons learned from the preceding experience to draw useful comparisons and examine evaluation outcomes. Both

evaluations were planned and facilitated by Josh Lerner[3] from the New School of Research as the lead research and myself as the research assistant. Although Josh and I share all the data collected throughout the research including: observation notes, interview notes, and documents, I am the author of the present paper and thus, accountable for the interpretations and conclusions expressed herein.

Finally, the opportunity to work with another facilitator, tenant researchers and staff, under the auspices of a funding organization such as Toronto Community Housing, presented valuable opportunities as well as potential pitfalls for the research. These actors represent diverse positions of power and subjective locations that undoubtedly shaped the research context. Opinions expressed during the course of the evaluation could have been tempered by the need to gain approval from others in supervisory positions, or the desire for inclusion within the participating group (Burke, 1998). Furthermore, as a facilitator-researcher or participant-observer, it was sometimes difficult to navigate amongst the diverse voices that comprised the research environment as well as locate my own. Through the careful collection of data, practice of informed consent and self-reflexivity, I attempted to maintain the integrity of research findings, respectful research relations and to the best extent, capture the diverse experiences of the present empirical study.

Organization of Research Paper

The paper will be organized into five sections, each of which builds on the one previous. The first explores the literature on participatory evaluation to unravel some of the theoretical aims and advantages of the approach, as well as process dimensions that distinguish participatory evaluation from other forms of evaluation. It concludes with some of the ongoing debates in the field that the paper hopes to address. The second section describes the nature and extent of stakeholder participation in the present case study to assess the barriers to participation that manifest themselves in real-life settings and strategies that can be applied to address them. The third explores *how* stakeholder participation can be channeled to generate strong knowledge claims that produce "useful" findings and recommendations. The fourth section reports and discusses the extent to which the expected outcomes of the evaluation were achieved to determine whether the quality of these results could be attributed to the process dimensions of the participatory evaluation methodology,

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[3] The name of Josh Lerner is used in the paper with his permission.

or to other contextual factors. The concluding section reflects on the case study to outline some of the contributions participatory evaluation can offer to the evaluation of participatory process as well as the specific demands it places on the role of evaluators, participants and the participating organization. Furthermore, it discusses some of the enabling conditions that may serve to make the participatory evaluation approach more or less useful in different types of circumstances.

I: Locating Participatory Evaluation in the Literature

The practice of evaluations has been identified as an effective means of exploring important questions that define participatory processes, such as what impact are they really having, whom are they benefiting and how to best improve the process design to meet the set objectives for the project. Despite these advantages, the topic of evaluation has only been scantly addressed in literature on participation, and widely ignored in the design of public participation processes (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Chess, 2000). According to Abelson and Gauvin (2006, 5): "despite years of documenting public participation experiences, the practice of public participation evaluation is still in its infancy."

At the same time, there is evidence of a growing interest in the topic. In 2006, the Canadian Policy Research Network published a report that highlighted the benefits of public participation evaluation and explored strategies to promote its uptake (Abelson and Gauvin, 2006). More recently, the Canadian Community for Dialogue and Deliberation (2009) conference hosted a roundtable focused on evaluating participation and continues to include the topic as an integral part of its research agenda. The literature and evaluation practice also offers practitioners a variety of methods when deciding on an evaluation approach for their participatory program.

One of the most prominent and recent trends in evaluation theory and practice is the increased focus on participatory approaches to evaluation that actively include stakeholders as evaluative subjects in the process (Mathison, 2005; Mark, 2001). The term "stakeholder" meaning people or groups who have an identifiable stake or a vested interest in a program such as sponsors, program managers, implementers, as well as intended beneficiaries (Greene, 2005). According to Cousins and Whitmore (1998, 5), since the mid-1990s studies on evaluations that engage evaluators and program participants in extensive interactions were "emerging at an astounding pace." Even those who do not embrace

participation as an ideal cannot deny the prominence of such themes as stakeholder participation, inclusion and empowerment in the evaluation field (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009). For these reasons, it is important to explore what participatory models of evaluation can offer to participatory programs or processes.

The Case for Stakeholder Participation in Evaluation

Various justifications have driven the interest in stakeholder participation both in the realms of evaluation theory and practice. These justifications can be broadly organized into the following categories, which are not mutually exclusive, yet distinguishable by their major emphases: (1) epistemological (2) practical or pragmatic (3) emancipatory and (4) deliberative (Weaver and Cousins, 2004; Cousins et al., 1996; Greene, 2000).

Epistemologically, stakeholder participation in evaluations has often been justified as a means for generating "valid" knowledge claims. Based on post-positivist reflections, the argument posits that stakeholders hold valuable knowledge about the dynamics of the program and the needs the program is intended to fulfill (Brisolara, 1998). Similarly, Ryan et al. (1998, 113) argue that "a program is no more and no less than how it is experienced and understood by diverse, participating stakeholders." Thus, evaluation data needs to be connected and rooted in these diverse meanings and experiences to generate meaningful and valid results (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). Stakeholder involvement is one way evaluators can build a more holistic understanding of the program experience and encourage more effective and sustainable program change (Ryan et al., 1998).

Calls for stakeholder participation have also evolved from the pragmatic desire to do evaluations that are useful and actually used. Participatory approaches to evaluations gained prominence in the United States in response to "utilization crisis" that grappled the field of evaluation in the 1970s and 1980s (Brisolara, 1998). The results of traditional evaluation methods were thought to be under-used in decision-making and in constructing a better understanding of a program's process and impact (Greene, 1987). In response, various studies argue that if key stakeholders are involved in determining the course of an evaluation, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over the process, and thereby more likely to use the recommendations (Patton, 2005). In this case, utilization might be more contingent on stakeholder interaction with the evaluative process rather than a report (Cousins et al., 1996).

Recent years have also seen the development of emancipatory approaches that go beyond pragmatic goals of evaluation use, to promote stakeholder participation in the interest of equity and social justice (Greene, 2000). Drawing from critical, feminist and Marxist theories, the argument recognizes the structures of power embedded in the processes of knowledge inquiry that systematically exclude individuals and groups based on factors such as class, race and gender (Ryan et al., 1998). As a result, some practitioners began to address issues of power in evaluations and promote the involvement of less powerful stakeholders as a vehicle for empowerment and social change (Whitmore, 1998; Friedmann, 1992). Evaluation is thus conceived as a developmental process where, through the involvement of less powerful stakeholders in investigation, education and action, individuals and power dynamics in the social context can be changed (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

Finally, there is also the deliberative rationale for stakeholder inclusion in evaluation (Greene, 2000). This justification is based on the recognition that evaluation does not stand-alone as simply a logic or methodology. Rather, it is a practice deeply embedded within larger sociopolitical and moral structures of society. As such, it should make an explicit value commitment to the values of deliberative democracy (House and Howe, 2000). Evaluations should be based on democratic principles of inclusion, dialogue and deliberation to ensure that the program or policy conversation includes all legitimate, relevant interests. These principles can ensure the accuracy and integrity of evaluative claims as well as position evaluation as a vital societal institution for the realization of democratic societies (House, 2005).

The epistemological, practical, emancipatory and deliberative justifications present cogent arguments for stakeholder involvement in evaluation. At the same time, critics are concerned that the approach can threaten the long-held evaluation tradition of "objectivity" intended to guard against personal bias and preserve the validity of findings (Brisolara, 1998). In evaluations however, as in other forms of inquiry, objectivity can be said to be more an aspiration than a quality, as no evaluation is ever totally objective. Subjective decision-making takes place at some point of the process, whether in the problem statement, in the analysis, or in the motivation for conducting the evaluation (Garaway, 1995). Thus, for some evaluators, the demand for separation of subject and object can be deemed inappropriate for studies involving social interactions or, itself a "product of colonizing science" (Brisolara,

1998, 34). Deliberative practitioners on the other hand believe that engaging all relevant stakeholders in dialogue and deliberation can reduce biases, but agree that they can never be fully eliminated (House, 2005).

From this discussion, one can ascertain many theoretical benefits to stakeholder involvement in the evaluation of participatory processes. The approach allows practitioners to extend their value commitment to democratic participation to the realm of evaluations, without sacrificing the credibility of the findings and potentially enhancing the utility of the results. Furthermore, the approach promises to benefit its participants not only through increased voice and empowerment, but also through channeling the process of inquiry towards social change and justice. Whether objectivity is compromised or not in the process, may not be the right question. Instead, there must be ongoing reflection on how (not if) personal bias is affecting the evaluation (marino, 1997).

The translation of the above ideals into practice however, places demands on stakeholders, professional evaluators, as well as the evaluation process that are quite novel compared to conventional[4] evaluations. To explore these implications, the following discussion will focus on the theoretical and practical dimensions of one of the most popular models of stakeholder involvement in evaluation, *participatory evaluation*.

Definition of Participatory Evaluation

The growing interest in stakeholder participation in evaluations produced various forms of collaborative inquiry that went by various names – democratic evaluation, empowerment evaluation, and development evaluation, among others (House and Howe, 2000; Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005; King, 2007). What is more, various scholars and practitioners from a diversity of backgrounds including the educational and international development field are discussing its application (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998; Crishna, 2006; Rice and Franceschini, 2007). Among these varying sources, the one label that has been most widely used as a descriptor of collaborative work is *participatory evaluation* (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

The literature provides various definitions to help capture the phenomenon of participatory evaluation. For Mathie and Greene (1997, 279), "a defining feature of

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[4]Various terms have been used in the literature to refer to non-participatory evaluations i.e. conventional (Rebien, 1996), technocratic (Murray, 2002). Even though these terms are ambiguous and need further specification, I will use the words conventional throughout the text to qualify evaluations that are not participatory.

[participatory evaluation] is the *active engagement* of multiple stakeholders." For Cousin and Whitmore (1998, 5) "participatory evaluation implies that, when doing an evaluation, researchers, facilitators, or professional evaluators *collaborate* in some way with individuals, groups, or communities who have a decided stake in the program, development project, or other entity being evaluated." King (2005, 291) argues that, "participatory evaluations involve program staff or participants actively in *decision-making* and other activities related to the planning and implementation of evaluation results." Based on these definitions, participation evaluation seems to imply that stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process through some form of *meaningful participation* and *collaborative decision-making*.

These concepts, however, are relatively vague and leave us with many methodological questions. What does "meaningful participation" imply in an evaluation? Are some stakeholders more important than others? Where exactly does the border lie between participatory and conventional evaluations? To address these questions, Cousins and Whitmore (1998) and other authors provide two frameworks that help practitioners and theorists distinguish between participatory and non-participatory evaluation (Brisolara, 1998; Daigneault and Jacob, 2009; King, 2007).

Process Dimensions of Participatory Evaluation

In their seminal paper "Framing Participatory Evaluations," Cousins and Whitmore (1998) focus on three *process* dimensions of participatory evaluation as a means to analyze any evaluation approach that purports to be participatory and help users distinguish it from non-participatory evaluations. The first dimension is (1) *stakeholder selection for participation* (also called the diversity dimension), which addresses the types of stakeholders involved in the evaluation, ranging from restriction to primary users to inclusion of all legitimate groups. The term "primary users" refers to stakeholders with program responsibility and power to enact recommendations (Cousins and Earl, 1995). The second dimension is (2) *depth of participation*; it ranges from consultation (with no decision-making control or responsibility) to deep participation, namely involvement in all aspects of an evaluation, including design, data collection, data analysis, reporting as well as decisions about dissemination of results. The third dimension is (3) *control of the evaluation process*, conceived as a continuum ranging from control of decisions being completely in the hands of professional evaluators to control being exerted entirely by stakeholders. Control in this case relates particularly to technical

decisions that deal with the evaluation process and conduct as opposed to decisions about whether and when to initiate the evaluation.

For Daigneault and Jacob (2009, 337) these process components are the "necessary constitutive dimensions" of participatory evaluation. In other words, each dimension is required to classify an evaluation as participatory. The basis for their claim is that these process components are found in more or less explicit form among the work of many authors in the field of evaluation. The Cousin and Whitmore (1998) article is also one of the most cited chapters ever published in *New Directions for Evaluation* (King, 2007). As a result, the framework can bring clarity to the conceptual category of participatory evaluation and help distinguish the practice from other approaches based on the dimensions of diversity, control and depth of participation

The diversity component for instance directly addresses the question: who are the non-evaluator participants involved in participatory evaluation? The most obvious answer is stakeholders – a concept that can be defined as people whose lives are affected by the program or people whose decisions can affect the future of the program (Greene, 1987). But all evaluations are "participatory" to a certain extent (Rebien, 1996). Evaluation sponsors for instance, are also stakeholders and have always been involved in evaluations (King, 2005). More often than not, they define the evaluation terms of reference, provide payment for the evaluation and use findings. In other instances, evaluators interact with program staff and beneficiaries either by asking their concerns or requesting data (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009).

The Cousins and Whitmore (1998) model of participatory evaluation departs from this picture of conventional evaluation by involving not only the evaluator but also various actors in the process of actually producing the evaluation. Mere contact between an evaluator and stakeholders is not enough. That entails participation in a number of "technical tasks" of the evaluation process such as evaluation design and interpretation of findings. These technical tasks are normally considered to be the responsibility of evaluators with professional credentials, while stakeholders often act as data providers (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009). In participatory evaluations, evaluators are required to share their tasks with non-evaluative stakeholders, who play a significant and active role in the evaluation process.

Involvement in a number of different evaluation tasks however is a necessary but not sufficient condition for participatory evaluation. Stakeholders can be involved throughout the whole process but in the form of tokenistic participation that implies no decision-making

authority. Inversely, stakeholders can act as real subjects of the evaluation and exercise a significant degree of control or decision-making power over a number of evaluation tasks. Control of the process is thus the third distinguishable feature of "meaningful participation" in participatory evaluations (Cousins and Earl, 1995a; Burke, 1998; King, 2005). Evaluators and stakeholders share control of the research agenda and the research decision-making process. Taken together the three process dimensions: diversity, depth of participation and control distinguish participatory evaluation from conventional forms of evaluation as well as provide an analytical tool to study participatory approaches to participation.

Practical and Transformative Strands of Participatory Evaluation

The literature also tends to conceptualize participatory evaluation based on the underlying reasons (or rationales) for choosing a participatory approach in a given evaluative project (Brisolara, 1998; Smits and Champagne, 2008). Although the general principle of collaboration between evaluators and non-evaluators underscores virtually all forms of participatory evaluation, the approach is also differentiated according to two principal strands: practical and transformative (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998; Brisolara, 1998). The former focusing on organizational decision-making and problem solving, while the latter on the empowerment of disadvantaged or oppressed groups. The following section explores the contours of these constructs in order to assess some of the diverging perspectives on the appropriate goals for participatory evaluation as well as the different ways one can enact the approach. In particular, the discussion will highlight how power, stakeholder learning and action play a defining role in participatory evaluations.

Practical participatory evaluation is considered the pragmatic strand of participatory evaluation developed primarily in the United States and Canada for use in private organizations and educational settings (Brisolara, 1998). Its central function is to enhance evaluation use for the purpose of programmatic decision-making and problem solving without necessarily making an explicit commitment to social change. The strand draws from the premise that stakeholder participation in evaluation will enhance evaluation relevance, ownership, and thus utilization (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). For this purpose, practical participatory evaluation demands that expert evaluators work in "partnership" with program practitioners to produce knowledge in response to practical problems or local evaluative questions (Weaver and Cousins, 2004).

For practical reasons, proponents of this strand of participatory evaluation prefer to work with primary users of evaluation who have the power to do something with the evaluation findings (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). The argument posits that by limiting the choice of participants to stakeholders closely associated with program support and management, the evaluation stands a better chance of meeting the program decision-maker's time lines and need for information (Garaway, 1995). It also applies the "personal factor" of utilization-focused evaluation (see Patton, 1997), which suggests that people or groups who are actively involved with and interested in an evaluation, will be more likely to use its results.

In terms of the role and responsibilities of participants in the evaluation, the utilization focus suggests that these are to be divided in such a way as to promote the greatest use (Garaway, 1995). For this purpose, practical participatory evaluation proponents such as Cousins and Earl (1995b) question the value and viability of engaging practitioners in highly technical activities (data collection, quantitative data analysis) as opposed to less technical ones (planning, interpretation, dissemination). Instead, they promote a shared decision-making model or "partnership process" (Smits and Champagne, 2008) where the expert evaluator is responsible for ensuring the quality of methods and evaluation activities, while stakeholders contribute to the substance or content (i.e. evaluation questions) of the evaluation. The attention to technical quality and the central role of the expert evaluator is justified as important to maintain the quality of evaluation efforts, and lend legitimacy to participatory evaluation outside the local context (Brisolara, 1998).

The approach also develops a praxis that blends utilization and action (Papineau and Kiely, 1996; Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). The notion of use in the literature most often attends to Weiss' (1998) three types of impact or uses of evaluation findings: (a) instrumental use, which occurs when the results are applied to practical operations within program (i.e. programmatic decisions) (b) conceptual use, which stimulates changes in program theory or orientation (i.e. stakeholder attitude or understandings) and (c) symbolic use, which suggests findings are used to persuade organizational change, for example, to advocate for underrepresented stakeholders (Cousins and Wright, 1998; Turnbull, 1999). Typically, impact is conceptualized in terms of effect the evaluation has on an undifferentiated group of "users" or "decision-makers" (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

The literature also highlights other developments in the evaluation utilization field that

have become part of an integrated rationale for participatory evaluation. Conceptions of utilization and evaluation impact are being broadened beyond program decision-making and problem solving to include organizational learning and change (De Luca et al., 2009; Cousins and Earl, 1995a; Cousins, Donohue and Bloom, 1996). The focus in this case is the purposeful use of the evaluation process (process use) rather than the end products or results (Herrera et al., 2009). By taking part in the evaluation, participants may better understand the evaluation process and gain program evaluation skills, particularly if the design of the evaluation includes structured learning strategies. As a result, participants develop an appreciation and acceptance of evaluation, as well as program evaluation skills that may increase the evaluation capacity of the organization over time (Cousins and Earl, 1995a). The process of an evaluation and what is learned throughout the process is thus understood as an equally important outcome of the participatory evaluation endeavor.

Transformative participatory evaluation on the other hand invokes participatory principles and evaluative actions for a radically different purpose. The model, which has its experiential roots in the global South, makes an explicit commitment to promoting collective action for social change and addressing inequities in power and voice in order to benefit the most marginalized (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). It aims to empower disenfranchised groups through participation in the process of constructing and respecting their own knowledge and through increased understanding of the political connections between knowledge, power and control (Brisolara, 1998).

The evaluation tasks and products are understood as a means to transform power relations and facilitate collective learning, reflection and action (Burke, 1998). In terms of participant selection, the emphasis is on securing the participation of a diverse range of stakeholders, especially those with least power in the context, notably intended program beneficiaries, and their communities, and sometimes front-line staff (Herrera et al., 2009). The evaluation setting must allow the "team" to control decisions and resources from start to finish, otherwise the empowerment process is limited in its impact (King, 2005).

For these reasons it is no surprise that practitioners of transformative participatory evaluation have made analyses of sources of power, limitations on power, and strategies for sharing power central elements of their work (Brisolara, 1998). Particularly, when it concerns the relationship between professional evaluators and non-evaluator participants. Although evaluators and facilitators may have direct roles in training participants, the dependence on

such professionals is expected to diminish as time passes and local experience is acquired (Burke, 1998). As a result, capacity building, training and participant support also become integral components of the evaluation effort (Herrera et al., 2009)

In seeking to democratize the production and use of knowledge, transformative participatory evaluation directly challenges the notion of objectivity by making explicit the political connections between knowledge, power and control. Popular knowledge is assumed to be as valid and useful as scientific knowledge (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). At the same time, proponents of the transformative strand recognize that different measures are of equal or greater importance, such as ownership of the decision-making process, change in the program environment, and increased equity in the distribution of resources (Brisolara, 1998).

Similar to participatory action research, transformative participatory evaluation has been described as a three-pronged activity of investigation, education and action (Brisolara, 1998). The evaluation focuses not only on data collection, analysis and dissemination, but also the learning inherent in the process and on any actions that may result. According to Brunner and Guzmann (1987, 11), participatory evaluation is an "educational process through which social groups produce action-oriented knowledge about their reality, clarify and reach consensus about further action." This way, the process allows the evaluation to move from questions of power to conditions of empowerment.

The conceptualization of "empowerment" as the action component of participatory evaluation nonetheless, appears to mean different things to various authors expounding this form of evaluation practice. Papineau and Kiely (1996) define it as capacity building, while Schnoes et al. (2000, 61) describe it as an "increase in participant's sense of control over and ownership of the evaluation process in the long term." Whatever the objective, both emphasize the benefits accrued to the participants *in* the process and as a result of participation rather than the exclusive focus on evaluation outcomes (Greene, 2005).

But not all practitioners promote empowerment as a "legitimate" goal of the evaluative. Some argue that it confuses evaluation with activities such as social work or community development (Brisolara, 1998). Others are concerned that by placing more emphasis on stakeholder *processes*, the empowerment and transformative literature may place less emphasis on evaluation *findings* (Mark 2001). Transformative participatory evaluation proponents nonetheless, defend empowerment as a critical element of their work (Fetterman and Wandersman, 2005; Brisolara, 1998). Given that evaluation is inherently a political

process and that some people inevitably gain from an evaluation while others may lose, one cannot escape the question of whose interest is being served in this process of inquiry (Garaway, 1995).

Digging a Little Deeper: Differences and Similarities

The practical and transformative strands of participatory evaluation demonstrate how the nature and form of stakeholder involvement in evaluation varies depending on the rationale. Practical participatory evaluation approach for instance is a pragmatic one. Its conservative approach to action aims largely to support organizational decision-making by involving a few key personnel (sometimes in a limited manner) in certain aspects of the evaluation process, while relying on the expert status of the professional evaluator. Practitioners of transformative participatory evaluation, on the other hand, make an up-front commitment to social justice and thus, are more likely to build control by stakeholders into the evaluation process, and intentionally work with those that have less power in a situation, such as program beneficiaries.

Despite these differences, these two strands also exhibit substantial commonalities. Both are participatory models that share a commitment to participation and the creation of "valid local data" from the practitioners' perspective (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998, 10). Both highlight the importance of process in evaluative projects, through which the participants develop a sense of ownership, new skills and understandings of their social environment (Herrera et al., 2009). It is also difficult to imagine that a practical participatory evaluation that leads to greater understanding of programs and the development of skills in systematic inquiry would not, concomitantly, empower participants. Equally, a transformative participatory evaluation endeavor could prove to be of considerable practical value in project development and implementation (King, 2007).

The distinction is further muddled in real-life applications of participatory evaluation that pursue empowerment and utilization as compatible and complementary goals within a single evaluation (Garaway, 1995). For instance, Papineau and Kiely's (1996) study of a participatory methodology in the context of a grassroots community development organization, argued that for the participatory evaluation process to be empowering, it was important that the evaluation be able to meet stakeholders' goals and culminate in concrete action. According to the authors, "since [participatory evaluation] is generally time

consuming and work intensive, it would be disempowering for participants to contribute so many hours to a process that was not ultimately useful on an individual level or organizational level" (90).

These blurring lines between the practical and transformative approach seem to suggest that the choice between the two does not need to be an either-or. For Brisolara (1998, 25) "these strands need not be viewed as rival models of evaluation: both are participatory models that share a commitment to participation (some would say democratic pluralism) but differ in where they would align themselves on a continuum that ranges from practical (utilization-focused, the status quo) to transformative (action-oriented, ideological)." This observation is particularly important since the rationales have particular requirements that do not always neatly correspond to the conditions, needs and values of a program environment.

These two conceptual frameworks of participatory evaluation can also serve practitioners and theorists alike to place their practice in a participatory context. Participatory evaluation places unique demands on the evaluation process, particularly on the role of stakeholders and external evaluators. In the process, it elevates considerations of power dynamics, knowledge production, and opportunities for learning and action to the center of the evaluative effort. For the purposes of this paper, the discussions contained in these frameworks will serve as an analytical lens not only to study participatory evaluation, but also to assess its viability for the evaluation of participatory processes.

Limitations and Difficulties of Participatory Evaluation

The model nonetheless continues to be the subject of critical questions and reflection by both proponents and skeptics. The following paragraphs present some of the most pressing debates and points for discussion in the literature, including: (1) pitfalls to participation (2) role of evaluator/facilitator (3) tensions between process and product (4) conditions enabling participatory evaluation and (5) general usefulness. These issues remain critical to the practice of participatory evaluation, whether practical or transformative, and constitute important considerations for the design and implementation of the process.

Pitfalls of Participation: In participatory evaluations, stakeholders are expected to assume an active role as subjects in the evaluation process as well as dedicate significant time and effort to the collaborative endeavor. For many people, these responsibilities go beyond

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their usual tasks and entail a steep learning curve in terms of skills and capacities (King, 1995). What is more, evaluators face the culture of dependence on experts ingrained within communities that inhibits involved parties from effective participation in decisions that affect them (Gregory, 2000). These factors can pose serious constraints on the evaluation effort and demand that outside evaluators pay equal attention to the human aspects of the process as well as the technical. That entails questions of when and how is the training of participants to be accommodated in the evaluation process. Are there other support structures or strategies that can facilitate meaningful stakeholder participation? How can the tendencies towards dependence on external sources of expertise be dealt with in the methodology? Moreover, should anyone be able to participate in participatory evaluation or are there selection criteria that improve the process?

Role of Evaluator/Facilitator: Beyond the new roles and responsibilities placed on participating stakeholders, participatory evaluation also demands that outside evaluators assume non-traditional roles ranging from facilitator, educator to "change agent" in the interest of promoting collaboration and ensuring the evaluation objectives are met. Participatory evaluation requires the evaluator to be skilled in working cooperatively, in being willing and able to share experiences, knowledge, insights and perhaps most difficult, power (Whitmore, 1998). But what challenges do these roles entail in practice? In particular, how do external evaluators address the political realities of power and control that permeate the context of the evaluation? When and how do they "hand over the stick" – that is, give authentic control to the participants? How does one address the variation in power and influence among participants? Finally, since issues of power also manifest themselves in the potential to get results, how much should (or can) an outside evaluator meddle in the affairs of the participants or the organization?

Tensions between Process and Product: The literature also suggests that there can be serious operational challenges with participatory evaluation, particularly when trying to reconcile the model's ideals of diversity and action as well as participation and credible inquiry. Too much diversity can prevent progress on participatory evaluation's action agenda (Greene, 1987). Yet, too little diversity renders the action impotent (if powerful stakeholders have been excluded) or undemocratic and disempowering (if disenfranchised groups are not included) (Ryan et al., 1998). Theory also argues that a strong (inclusive, equitable, fair) dialogic process of participation will generate strong (credible, persuasive, contextually

relevant) knowledge claims. But, critics are concerned that by "giving the evaluation process away," the technical adequacy and objectivity of the studies will decrease, leading potentially to inaccurate and misinterpreted data, incorrect results and flawed recommendations (Crishna, 2006; King, 2005). These potential conflicts leave practitioners with important methodological questions: Is a strong process good enough for participatory evaluation? Are participatory aims sufficiently well realized if the process works, but the products are thin and weak? Moreover, can these tensions between process and product be resolved?

Conditions Enabling Participatory Evaluation: People interested in stakeholder participation in evaluations also need to consider what conditions need to be in place for meaningful participatory evaluation to flourish. Indeed, different practice contexts call for different approaches to evaluation and one evaluation approach does not suffice for all situations (Mark, 2001). Opportunities may be lost if the evaluations are constructed to fit one narrow vision of evaluations, rather than carefully fit the process to the characteristics of the program environment (Greene, 1991; Papineau and Kiely, 1996). Thus, if we are concerned with the viability of participatory evaluation to participatory processes, we also need to understand a great deal more about the kind of conditions that enable or make possible a successful undertaking of the process. Beyond applicability, these enabling conditions can also determine possibilities for the institutionalization and sustainability of participatory evaluation practice, particularly over the long term (Cousins and Earl, 1995a).

General Usefulness: Despite the theoretical strengths of participatory evaluation, there is little documentation of how it actually works in practice (Mark, 2001). In particular, support for the argument that participation of major stakeholder groups enhances evaluation use seems to be more theoretical than empirical (Smits and Champagne, 2008). Both positive (Rebien, 1996) and negative (King, 1998) effects of participatory evaluation have been documented, thereby calling for more investigation into the assumed link between practitioner participation during the evaluation process and increased use of findings in decision-making. How can the involvement of actors in the participatory evaluation process strengthen the use of evidence? Does the depth of participation predict evaluation utilization? Finally, do participants have to be powerful decision-makers for the approach to be useful? A deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning participatory evaluation could provide evaluators with tools to identify possible barriers and modify actions during the process, to ensure that the evaluation contributes to the utilization of findings.

The above discussion on the limits and difficulties of participatory evaluation combined with the preceding theoretical account of the justifications, rationales and process dimensions for the approach, offer an analytical basis for the empirical investigation of participatory evaluation at Toronto Community Housing. The organization contracted two external evaluators/facilitators, including myself, to engage tenants and staff on an evaluation of their participatory budgeting program. The subsequent sections will describe and assess the implementation of the evaluation effort and its outcomes in order to draw out some of the opportunities, and challenges, participatory evaluation poses to the evaluation of participatory processes.

II: Stakeholder Participation at Toronto Community Housing

Although stakeholder participation is a defining dimension of participatory evaluations, its translation into the design and implementation of evaluations is not straightforward. The nature and meaning of participation is shaped not only by the rationale for the participatory evaluation project (utilization, empowerment) but also the needs and circumstances of the program environment (Cousins and Earl, 1992). To understand how the process dimensions of participatory evaluation were implemented in the present study, the following section will first discuss the reasons behind the use of participatory evaluation at Toronto Community Housing. It will then describe the nature of stakeholder participation to explain how the evaluation design accommodated the participatory ideals of participatory evaluation with the set objectives of the project and the realities of the local context. The discussion aims to highlight some of the operational barriers facing the participatory goals of participatory evaluation as well as possible strategies to address these challenges.

Case Description and Objectives for Participatory Evaluation

Toronto Community Housing is the second largest social housing provider in North America, with 164,000 tenants, that serves some of the most vulnerable populations in Toronto including low income residents, new immigrants, elderly, disabled, as well as single parent families (Lerner and Wagner, 2006). The organization envisions its role as a social housing provider to entail the creation of healthy communities "where people choose to live because the quality of housing is good, they feel safe, they are empowered and can participate in civic life" (Toronto Community Housing 2009, 29). Engaging tenants in

decision-making is identified as an important means to achieve these goals. The strategy "leads to the development of policies and services that meet the needs and aspirations of tenants and the provision of meaningful opportunities for tenants to influence decisions and increase levels of tenant satisfaction" (Ibid, 29). One of the "driving forces" of the organization's tenant engagement strategy is participatory budgeting (Staff D, 2010).

The idea of citizen participation in budget making was first launched in 1989 when the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre introduced an annual process in which thousands of city residents decide how to allocate part of the municipal budget (Abers, 2000). The model has garnered attention for improving government accountability, civic participation, as well as the equitable distribution of resources (Fung and Wright, 2003). Today, there are over 1,200 participatory budgets around the world being applied in various formats to municipal, state, school, university and public housing budgets (Sintomer et al., 2008). Although the initiatives vary in form, they generally follow the basic process of diagnosis, discussion, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring (Lerner, 2006). First, community members identify local priority needs, generate ideas to respond to these needs, and elect budget delegates to represent their communities. These representatives develop concrete projects to address local needs with the support of local staff and/or experts. Finally, delegates vote on which projects the municipality or institution will implement during the fiscal year, while residents monitor the process (Biaocchi and Lerner, 2007).

Toronto Community Housing introduced participatory budgeting in 2001 to allow tenants to decide on the distribution of part of the organization's capital funds (up to 9 million dollars) to local priorities (Lerner et al., 2010). Over several months, tenants allocate funds to projects such as playgrounds, lobby renovations and hallway painting. Although the process has changed over the years, its current form unravels in the following stages:

1) Tenants and local staff hold meetings in each building to discuss and identify the capital priority needs for the building community. Tenants also elect delegates to represent their buildings at the regional budget deliberations, also called Allocation Days.

2) Local staff organizes Delegate Preparation Meetings to allow tenant to develop the chosen priority for their building into a coherent proposal and prepare a presentation board that will be used to garner support at Allocation Days.

3) The building delegates attend Allocation Days to discuss and deliberate spending priorities with other delegates from their city region. The building delegates vote and rank the capital improvement priorities that the organization will implement during the fiscal year.

4) Tenants oversee implementation through monitoring committees.

In 2009, Josh Lerner, a PhD student from New York, approached Toronto Community Housing with the intention of involving both tenants and staff in his research on participatory budgeting. In part, this approach was designed to address the logistical challenge of collecting data from multiple participatory budgeting events taking place throughout the city at the same time. The research gradually evolved into a participatory evaluation, thanks in particular to the support of a few key staff. Based on interviews conducted after the evaluation, these staff expressed several motivations for pursuing a participatory evaluation.

Several key staff managers for participatory budgeting were keenly interested in sponsoring an evaluation of the process, both as a vehicle for program improvement and corporate accountability. Previous evaluations of the process were described by staff as mostly informal, inconsistent and unmethodical: "in the past, all the staff wanted to know was about logistics: was the food good? Was the washroom accessible? We're not a catering company!" (Staff B, 2010). Although informal reflections are in themselves valuable, project managers wanted to undertake a systematic inquiry of the process to learn about: (1) the program's strengths and limitations as well as (2) suggestions for ongoing development and improvement.

The focus on process improvement meant that the evaluation of participatory budgeting would serve as a *formative* evaluation: an approach that uses evaluation data to contribute to a decision-maker's understanding of the program so they can make wiser decisions to improve the process (Scarcini et al., 2009). Thus, instead of solely investigating the impact of the process, formative evaluation covers the activities that occurred during the planning, development and execution of the project. For staff, the formative focus could improve participatory budgeting as a community engagement practice, as well as provide evidence for accountability and reporting purposes.

For this purpose, the staff managers and the lead researcher chose a participatory approach to evaluation that included both tenants and key staff as legitimate stakeholders.

For one, they recognized that findings and recommendations needed to represent the values, concerns and experiences of the multiple parties involved in the process to be relevant and effective. In their experience, the non-participatory evaluations conducted in the past produced recommendations that were,

> "So far removed from the context of the organization that it wasn't relevant and it wasn't something that would be achievable very easily. In an ideal world that's great, but in the context that we're working within, it's not useful for helping us move forward with this process" (Staff C, 2010).

In particular, the participation of program staff directly responsible for the implementation of participatory budgeting was viewed as necessary to ensure the "usefulness" of evaluation results. As "deliverers" of the process they were also in the position to enact change. Thus, not only did the recommendations have to reflect their concerns, workload and time-line, the active involvement of staff could garner the necessary support or "buy-in" for the evaluation results.

Equally, there was an interest in involving tenants, the intended "beneficiaries" of participatory budgeting, as participants in the evaluation process. For one, the appeal complemented the agency's long time commitment to a participatory organizational philosophy. At a more practical level, sponsors recognized that the tenant perspective mattered to the effective evaluation of its programming. According to a staff person at Toronto Community Housing (C, 2010), "in participatory evaluation, we bring in people who are being impacted and looking at and reflecting on the process as a 'user'. [Tenants] can provide more relevant input than a staff or someone who is involved but who may not benefit the same thing."

Including tenants was also understood as an opportunity to strengthen their role in the governance structures of the organization. An upper management staff (A, 2010) explained that Toronto Community Housing "created systems and processes…[that] were pretty decent and we used experiences from other countries and all that. But there was that huge piece missing, which was tenants participating in a more active and engaging role." Through participation in the evaluation tasks, tenants could build useful research skills and knowledge for tenant activism and engagement. Some staff even saw the possibility as potentially empowering because "this way, the process could be changed to better reflect their own needs and they could be more empowered from being part of the process to make

decisions or make changes" (Staff C, 2010). At the end, however, sponsors of the evaluation hoped that participation would engender tenant ownership over the evaluation and its results to strengthen the participatory budgeting process. In the words of one staff member (A, 2010), "we have tried to do evaluations before, but this takes us further into anchoring it in the voices of tenants. The more you give voices to tenants, the bigger the choir is going to be, and the bigger the impact [the evaluation] is going to have."

Based on these diverse motivations, the facilitators and program managers agreed upon a participatory evaluation project that would incorporate tenants and staff in evaluative inquiry and culminate with the deliverable of a final report for further organizational action. The evaluation process would include 5-8 participatory workshops and opportunities for fieldwork. Although the facilitators were ultimately responsible for carrying out the evaluation, Toronto Community Housing agreed to provide organizational support in the form of accommodations, translation services, recruitment and communication.

According to these motivations and terms, the present study of participatory evaluation does not fall neatly into either the practical or transformative strands discussed in the literature review. Although the evaluation was concerned with enhancing staffs' use of results, the utilization rationale did not fame the overall research project. Participation was also conceived as an end in itself: a process by which to build the capacity of less powerful stakeholders (i.e. tenants) and facilitate their ownership over the evaluation and participatory budgeting process. Nonetheless, the contours of both approaches can still serve as analytical guidelines to describe, explain and examine the implementation of participatory evaluation in the current context.

The Design for Participation

Having described the evaluation in terms of background and motivation, we now turn to an analysis of its implementation in operational terms. For this purpose, the following discussion will apply the Cousins and Whitmore (1998) process framework as interpreted by Daigneault and Jacob (2009) to describe the nature and meaning of stakeholder participation in the present study. This approach to studying participatory evaluation allows researchers to explicitly consider the topic of participation and avoid the pure rhetorical use of the term. The analysis also aims to demonstrate how the process dimensions (diversity, depth and

control) were accommodated to meet evaluation objectives, and discuss some of the mediating factors that affected their full realization.

Stakeholder selection for participation: The first constitutive dimension of participatory evaluation concerns the range of diversity in stakeholder interests among the participants. In other words, to what extent is inclusiveness promoted in the evaluation to ensure that important perspectives are represented? Beyond focusing on the diversity of types of stakeholders however, the literature also points to the importance of accounting for the diversity *within* and *across* particular types of stakeholder groups to address the issue of representation (Mathieu and Greene, 1997). After all, not all members of a stakeholder group share the same values, concerns, and experiences.

In the present study, the principal "stakeholders" were identified as people whose lives are affected by the program (i.e. tenants) and people whose decisions can impact its future trajectory (i.e. staff). To accommodate this diversity however the evaluation faced a number of organizational realities. Staff participation was not made mandatory and no release was offered from other work duties for staff to join the evaluation. To accommodate, facilitators sought to collect the "staff perspective" through formal interviews, minutes from staff meetings and informal discussions. A number of staff with different implementation responsibilities was also invited to the last two workshops of the evaluation to revise the findings and shape recommendations. Tenant participants on the other hand were recruited to directly participate in the process and received remuneration. As a result, the main non-evaluative stakeholders participating throughout the evaluation were predominantly tenant representatives.

The participating tenants in 2010 were selected based on the principle of diversity to ensure that the composition of the group remained representative of the people that participatory budgeting is intended to reach. Although it would be difficult to build an evaluation team truly representative of the tenant population at Toronto Community Housing, staff outreached to the most active tenants in the community. Tenants interested in the evaluation were invited to a meeting where the project was explained and criteria presented for stakeholder selection. The criteria sought diversity in terms of age, gender and geographical location. Through a process of self-selection, tenants decided on the composition of the evaluation team, which included 10 women, 2 male and 1 youth that lived across the Toronto Community Housing stock. Three of the members participated as

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researchers during the previous 2009 evaluation, which was viewed as beneficial to optimize on tenant learning. Overall, the geographical criterion was upheld, while diversity based on age and gender was constrained, partially due to the limited pool of candidates available that may have resulted from poor outreach efforts.

Depth of participation: The depth of participation dimension is conceptualized as the *extent of involvement* in the full spectrum of technical research tasks, from planning and shaping the research, to data collection, analysis and interpretation, as well as reporting and follow up (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009). In other words, the process component deals with the number of tasks in which stakeholders are directly involved, rather than the level of control exercised at each stage of the process. The underlying assumption is that the more tasks non-evaluative stakeholders are involved in, the more participatory the evaluation.

In the present study, the participatory evaluation process followed standard building blocks of research inquiry; including research design, collection of data, analysis of findings and development of conclusions (Burke, 1998; Forss et al., 2006). Tenant participants were involved in the evaluation from beginning to end through workshops and fieldwork. As a group, they helped plan the research and decide on research methods, collected data, interpreted findings and developed recommendations.

> **Blueprint for the 2010 Participatory Evaluation**
>
> **Planning & Capacity Building (6 workshops)**
> - Tenant researchers identify evaluation criteria and indicators
> - Tenant researchers and facilitators design evaluation tools, including observation form, interview questions and evaluation survey
> - Tenant researchers learn and practice research skills
>
> **Data Collection**
> - Tenant researchers and facilitators observe and interview tenant participants at participatory budgeting events
> - Evaluation survey is distributed and completed by tenant participants
> - Facilitators conduct in-depth interviews with 8 staff
> - Facilitators review participatory budgeting documents and minutes from staff meetings
>
> **Data Analysis & Making Recommendations (4 Workshops)**
> - Tenants analyze data in small groups, with the facilitator participating in all groups
> - Two final evaluation workshops, in which a cross-section of staff, and tenants revise the evaluation findings and recommendations.
>
> **Reporting**
> - Facilitators write report in consultation with tenants and program managers

Full exposure to the methodological process was intended to contribute to tenant capacity to conduct research and evaluations. The only jobs that were conducted by external facilitators alone were the analysis of quantitative data, report writing and creation of presentation material. The tenants

nonetheless were offered the opportunity to revise the report and present the material. As a result, the extent of tenant-researcher engagement in the evaluation process covered a substantial part of the methodology.

The loci of staff participation, due to limited availability, was concentrated in the two Report and Planning Workshops at the end where program staff had the opportunity to review the findings, verify results and shape the final recommendations for the report. Project managers were also regularly consulted via email for input on the final version of research instruments as well as the report. One or two staff was also available during workshops for logistical support and to provide sufficient program knowledge.

Control of the evaluation process: Finally, participatory evaluation is characterized by the fact that non-evaluative stakeholders partially or totally control the evaluation process. Unlike diversity and depth however, this dimension is theorized and analyzed in relative terms (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009). One has to compare the control that participants have over the process to the control exercised by the external evaluator and decision-makers that sponsor the evaluation.

Control in the present case was shared and balanced between the outside evaluators and non-evaluative stakeholders. Although the sponsors decided on the focus and type of evaluation i.e. formative evaluation of participatory budgeting, tenant evaluators had substantive control over key decision points in the evaluation process. As a group, they established the criteria by which to evaluate participatory budgeting, decided on research methods to collect data, interpreted findings and contributed recommendations. Staff participants despite their limited participation in the front end of the evaluation had the opportunity to directly shape the final results during the last two workshops. The external evaluators on the other hand planned and facilitated the workshops as well as compiled and edited as necessary the findings and recommendations to ensure quality control and balanced representation of multiple perspectives.

Based on this discussion, "participation" in the context of the present participatory evaluation application was framed as the involvement of all legitimate stakeholders to the fullest extent possible in a process of shared decision-making. Stakeholders were viewed not as data-providers or consultants, but as active, engaged collaborators in all of the technical research tasks. The evaluation design incorporated various vehicles to accommodate stakeholder diversity and participation ranging from deep participation in workshop settings,

to thin participation in the form of email communication. Although external evaluators were ultimately responsible for directing the evaluation process and maintaining technical quality, they had to share control over important components of the methodology as well as the content of the evaluation.

Beyond Design: Barriers to Participation

Although the above diversity, depth and control framework helps to conceptualize the nature of stakeholder participation in the present study, it does not take into account the *intensity* of stakeholder involvement in the process and as such, does not exhaust the meaning of participation (Daigneault and Jacob, 2009). It assumes that that all non-evaluative stakeholders were *able* or *willing* to participate. Furthermore, it neglects to consider the experience of participation from the perspective of the participants, particularly tenants. The following section will discuss some of the factors that shaped the quality of stakeholder participation to deepen discussion on the barriers and strategies that need to be considered in the design of participatory approaches to evaluations.

One of the factors that challenged the evaluation effort was the evaluative capacity of the tenant researchers. Out of the 13 tenants, the majority did not have any experience conducting research or evaluations, although they could relate the process of social inquiry to their occupations and other tenant activities. Many did not feel comfortable writing, while others, especially senior participants, lacked the computer literacy needed to share data and facilitate communication outside the workshops. Some of the tenant participants cited these drawbacks as discouraging to their participation and a source of significant frustration.

To address these challenges the workshop design included interactive exercises that helped tenants "learn by doing." The activities were focused on building research skills such as note taking, interviewing and observation as well as necessary interpersonal abilities for collaborative work, including techniques for deliberation and participatory decision-making. The workshops, though essential, were insufficient in assisting tenants to learn and participate meaningfully in the evaluation process. The facilitators also incorporated informal measures of support outside the workshop setting to compensate for the varying skills among participants, such as impromptu computer tutorials and one-on-one guidance. Regular communication was also maintained to create necessary avenues for discussion and reflection, both on the content of the study and the process itself.

These strategies however, were dependent on the attitude of the facilitators to build trust for collaboration. Facilitators projected an interest in the participants' views, concerns and aspirations. In his work on collaborative evaluations, King (1995) underscores this "human" dimension of participatory evaluation, suggesting that even willing collaborators will limit their involvement if they do not feel supported during the study or do not trust the people involved. Thus, external facilitators need to focus not only on structure, but also embrace support and trust building as "a matter of belief" (97).

For their time and effort, tenant participants also received an honorarium from Toronto Community Housing. In addition, as was customary in the organization, tenants were guaranteed transport and child-care reimbursement as well as light dinners and refreshment. The effectiveness of this "incentive" structure nonetheless, remains unclear. Although most tenants expressed a personal commitment to the objectives of the evaluation, some were concerned that a few of their colleagues were *only* "looking to get paid" and did not take their responsibilities seriously. For them, this was one of the most frustrating aspects of the evaluation experience that challenged not only the facilitators but also the evaluation team. A tenant researcher (B, 2010) remarked, "people not pulling their weight and that bothers me; coming in late, leaving early, they were not part of the team."

To address these issues, evaluators found that establishing clear terms of participation at the start of the evaluation helped reduce misunderstandings and conflicts. Tenants had a chance to revise and sign an agreement that presented clear expectations for the research work. The agreement outlined ground rules for the evaluation as well as the responsibilities of supporting staff and facilitators. Tenant researchers generally followed the initial agreement. Many of them invested even *more* time and effort than expected to ensure the successful completion of their responsibilities.

Despite the structured and informal measures of support however, not all tenant participants were *able* or *willing* to fully participate to the same extent. To some degree, these issues resulted from insufficient recruitment efforts. Around 15 tenants were recruited in 2009 and 20 in 2010. Of these, at least a third were not suited for the project: they either had little experience with tenant engagement, little interest in conducting research, or histories of not respecting confidentiality. The tenant researchers that *were* interested and capable were also over-committed to other tenant activities, making it difficult to find time for their research work.

In terms of staff participation, the barriers were novel yet equally as challenging. Although Toronto Community Housing committed to having a wide representation of staff at the Evaluation and Planning Workshops, the attendance did not materialize. In 2009, roughly 30 staff (including top management) and 10 non-researcher tenants participated actively in each final workshop. In 2010, while plans for the workshops remained the same there was much less participation and support by local staff and upper management, and outside tenants were not invited. While it was suggested that the invitation arrived last minute, it became even more apparent that most staff were not aware of the research or did not know how to contribute to, or draw from, the evaluation process.

Some staff attributed the quality of their involvement to the fact that "people don't wake up and come to work because they work on participatory budgeting" (Staff D, 2010. Similarly, another staff member (Staff C, 2010) explained: "the evaluation was important and it was a priority but it wasn't the only priority and it wasn't always the priority…that limited the ability of the staff to be involved in a consistent way and being very on top of it." According to Ryan et al. (1998) people who attach high value to a given project will find more reasons to become involved in an evaluation than individuals who find some activity to be of low interest in their overall scheme of things. In light of competing priorities, one staff suggested that the evaluation scope could have been "less work intensive" because "if it's a very big thing and staff have so many other things that they are part of its very difficult to sell [the evaluation] as another big initiative that needs to be done" (Staff C, 2010).

At the same time, project managers admit that local staff were not adequately educated and informed about the evaluation purpose and value:

> "the more people know about it [evaluation] and are aware about why
> its being done, then the more successfully they can be involved and
> we can move through with the process. Even if the communication
> happened, I don't know that it happened in the most effective way
> that people understood what was required of them" (Staff C, 2010).

Indeed, considering that staff was not released from their routine tasks to meaningfully participate in the evaluation, better communication about the benefits and goals of the evaluation could have motivated staff buy-in or interest in the evaluation process.

These discussions on the nature and limits of stakeholder participation demonstrate that participation does not happen in a vacuum. Instead it is susceptible to a whole range of

influences that can present important barriers to the evaluation process (Gregory, 2000). To respond, participatory evaluation requires not only flexible evaluation design and time, but also continuing support from both the facilitator and the organization. Beyond capacity building, the facilitators invested significant effort to motivate and sustain tenant involvement. Organizational support in terms of logistics and communication also proved necessary to create the conditions for stakeholder participation. At the end, however, participatory evaluation demands a commitment that some people are *unable* or *unwilling* to make, and evaluators must accept these individuals' choices. In the words of King (1995, 95): "you can lead a person to an evaluation, but you cannot make him or her participate."

In light of these conclusions, it remains to be explored how participation was channeled to ensure "useful" findings and recommendations. In other words, how did the evaluation manage to address the tensions between the demands of participation and the product of the evaluation? Furthermore, did the constrained stakeholder participation compromise the evaluation's potential in terms of increasing the use of findings and capacity building? The subsequent sections will address these questions respectively.

III: From Participation to Credible Findings

One of the challenges faced in using participatory methods is being able to ensure that the study is "sound, reliable and valid" so that the final results are credible enough to influence or encourage change in programming (Crishna, 2006). Critics are concerned that shared decision-making over evaluation design and implementation can undermine the technical adequacy and objectivity of the study, leading potentially to misinterpreted data, inaccurate results and flawed recommendations (Smith, 1999; King, 2005). The following section tackles themes of "reliability" and "validity" in the present application of participatory evaluation to identify strategies that helped guarantee valid data and meaningful recommendations.

Evaluation Rigor

In this Toronto Community Housing study, although some quantitative data was collected, the evaluation design was primarily grounded in qualitative research as a means to capture the complex or subtle experiences of individuals and groups participating in the participatory budgeting process. This is not surprising since, according to Crishna (2006), participatory

evaluation stems from qualitative research principles. Accordingly, one can argue that similar standards of "rigor" or "trustworthiness," as it is usually termed in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003), can and *has* been adapted to participatory evaluation methodology as a means to strengthen evaluation results (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998; Crishna, 2006).

The use and nature of the terms "reliability" and "validity" have been highly contested in qualitative research due to their inception in the quantitative and scientific tradition (Davies and Dodd, 2002). Some qualitative researchers argue that these quality criteria are not applicable to their work and have at the same time proposed ways to redefine the terms so that they are more useful to qualitative inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Whilst it is beyond the scope of the paper to present a thorough exposition of this methodological debate,[5] the revision of these quality criteria are useful to assess how the present study pursued "credible" results. Long and Johnson (2000, 31) for instance, argue that the ultimate aim of reliability is "to ensure that data collection is undertaken in a consistent manner free from undue variation which unknowingly exerts an effect on the nature of the data." Validity, on the other hand, helps determine whether the research measures what it intended to measure and approximate the "truthfulness" of the results (Kirby et al., 2006).

Various strategies such as respondent validation and methodological triangulation have been prescribed to pursue reliability and validity in qualitative research (Johnson, 1997), but it remains unclear how these methods are applied in the practice of participatory evaluation. After all, the approach stipulates conditions of shared decision-making with non-evaluative stakeholders that are quite divergent from conventional research or evaluation endeavors. The following section examines how facilitators pursued "rigor" or "trustworthiness" at all stages of the evaluation process in order to understand how participation in evaluation can be channeled towards the generation of strong knowledge claims.

Key Moments and Decisions in the Evaluation Process

As previously mentioned, the participatory evaluation process in the present study followed standard building blocks of evaluative inquiry; including planning, collection of data, analysis of findings, development of recommendations, and reporting.

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[5] For a thorough exposition of the methodological debate on quality criteria see Seale, 1999; Winter, 2000.

Planning the Research: The tenant researchers commenced their participation by planning and developing the evaluation framework. In workshop settings, they identified both the criteria and indicators to assess the participatory budgeting process and selected the principal methods of data collection. This was a significant departure from the preceding year's evaluation where tenant researchers built on a pre-elaborated research plan. As a result, the planning of the evaluation required a lot more facilitation from the external evaluators to provide instructions and frame choices in a way that generated meaningful decisions and results.

First, facilitators pooled together the participants' understanding about participatory budgeting through a mapping exercise that allowed everyone to start out with a common basis of knowledge on the subject. This exercise was followed by discussions and decision-making around the criteria by which the practice of participatory budgeting was to be judged, as well as the corresponding indicators that could help measure and assess the state or condition of the criteria. To facilitate these discussions facilitators had to simplify these technical factors and ground them in the tenants' own experience so that they could be better understood and meaningfully used.

Goals of Research

Criteria

Indicators

Methods

Findings

Recommendations

Actions

Output (Report)

The research criteria and indicators were iteratively revised over the course of three workshops to allow tenant participants to make revisions, additions and changes, as well as permit the facilitators to refine the outputs as necessary. Although some tenant researchers found the number of indicators overwhelming, many found that developing the criteria and indicators helped them be more effective in conducting the evaluation: "at the beginning, I would write everything, it was overwhelming, grouping ideas into various categories made it easier to arrange ideas on paper and especially, mentally" (Tenant A, 2010)

Once the criteria and indicators were identified, determining how to collect and gather information was the next major step. The tenant researchers identified surveys, participant observation and key informant interviews as the data-collection methods for participatory evaluation. Nonetheless, the content for the interview and survey questions
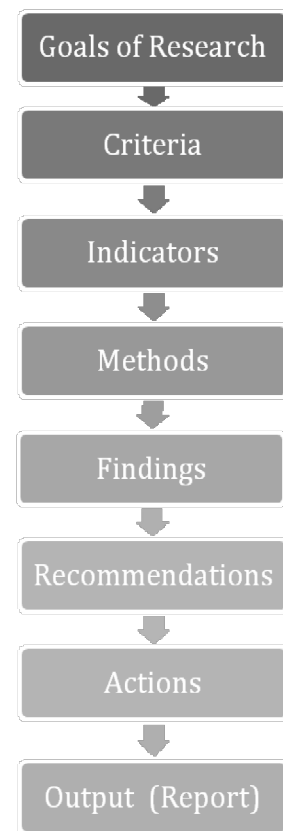
could not be collectively developed "from scratch" due to lack of time. Instead, facilitators used the instruments from last year's evaluation as a basis for discussion. Tenant participants revised and refined the content to ensure it addressed the collectively set criteria and indicators and that it corresponded to their level of experience and expertise. The approach also ensured the validity of the research instruments since they were "field tested" the year before and could demonstrate that the answers generated provided the information required. At the same time, tenant participation in the revision of these tools ensured that the words and language used in the surveys and tenant interviews were culturally appropriate and clear.

Collection of Data: Following the planning stage, tenant researchers and the facilitators conducted extensive fieldwork throughout the entire cycle of the 2010 participatory budget process. The evaluation team carried out participant observations at all major activities of the participatory process, interviewing tenant participants and collecting relevant material. To prepare tenants for these tasks and ensure the reliable compilation of data, facilitators provided methodological training in evaluation skills and thinking. The training was not simply instructional; it was facilitated through interactive activities that allowed tenants to "learn by doing." The activities were based on game techniques[6] that kept participants engaged while they learned and practiced basic observation and interviewing skills. The learning was also supported with instructional guides and individual feedback on field notes. Although tenants started out writing unfocused notes with few relevant details, over the course of the evaluation, the notes began to include more useful observations.

Nevertheless, full tenant participation in the collection of data was not always possible due to the social dynamics of the organizational environment. Structured interviews with key staff for example had to be conducted by the facilitators rather than the tenant researchers due to issues surrounding trust and confidentiality. Although tenants were introduced to the ethical considerations of research, including the practice of informed consent, facilitators were concerned that staff would be reluctant to share critical observations about their work with tenants as opposed to an interviewer external to the organization. Considering that the interviews were a crucial source of staff perspective, it was necessary for the facilitators to use their expertise and position as "neutral outsiders" to gather this data. These measures were fully explained to the tenant participants and most agreed that it was a justified method in the present context.

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[6] For more information on the use of game techniques to support participation, see Lerner, 2010.

In-depth interviews with staff were only one of the varied strategies the evaluation took to ensure that the interests, needs and experiences of all stakeholders were captured in the data. A common complaint about the preceding year's evaluation was that staff perspectives were under-represented in the findings and recommendations. Indeed, as one of the "deliverers" of the participatory budgeting process, staff constituted the main audience for evaluation result. To respond to these conditions of the evaluation, the few staff members that did assist with the evaluation workshops were asked to represent likely staff concerns and opinions. One of them actively asserted this role and facilitated access to information such as minutes from staff debriefs: "my way was to manipulate it to bring it back to the final report, so they can't use that next year as an excuse" (Staff B, 2010)

Staff support was not always consistent, however. There was weak communication regarding times and location for participatory budgeting events, which challenged the coordination of fieldwork. Organizational support was also lacking in the distribution, collection and input of survey information. Although the evaluation team managed to collect data consistently, the facilitators ended up being more directive and acting more autonomously in this effort than had been originally envisioned. These drawbacks underscored the differences of opinion that emerged around staff responsibilities and roles in the participatory study. Project managers openly complained about how they underestimated the time commitment required for the project particularly since "staff are usually not used to having to do so much for an evaluation" (Staff D, 2010)

Analyzing Findings and Making Recommendations: Once the data was collected, tenant researchers met to share and analyze findings, to identify main strengths and weaknesses of participatory budgeting, as well as develop potential recommendations for the design of the next cycle. Data analysis is usually taken over by outsiders or stakeholders located at higher institutional levels (Crishna, 2006). In the present study, tenant researchers as a collective conducted the initial analysis of findings through a process of dialogue and deliberation. To enable the meaningful participation of tenants in the interpretation of data, the outside facilitators had to frame and structure discussions to create more focus and effective dialogue among participants.

Although it has by now been well argued that the elimination of subjectivity during research is impossible (Harding, 1991), the present study found it helpful to underscore researcher neutrality to ensure balance between all legitimate perspectives. In the beginning,

tenant researchers tended to present their findings in seemingly adversarial terms, focusing on the wrongs committed by staff rather than the greater causalities for the issues encountered. The trend was particularly problematic since it reflected staff concern that the participatory evaluation study may be "too tenant-centered," ignoring staff constraints and conditions. As a result, facilitators encouraged participants during workshops and fieldwork to temporarily switch their "activist hats" to that of "neutral researchers" to ensure not only useful findings, but findings that staff as a target audience would be more willing to listen to. Tenants were not resistant to this framing of the evaluation and agreed that more balanced results could strengthen their advocacy positions.

Another challenge was finding a means to conduct analysis with tenant researchers in a way that was both inclusive and effective. As a result, discussions were purposefully structured in stages that helped improve the quality of findings and ensure that everyone's input could be given and received. With the help of the facilitators, tenants shared and revised findings individually, in pairs and as a group. The subsequent formulation of recommendations followed a similar pattern. These activities allowed each participant regardless of their level of ability to better communicate their data and participate meaningfully in the evaluation analysis. At the same time, the power of collective discussion helped tenants verify the "accuracy" and "importance" of their contributions to the study and filter through the first round of analysis.

However, developing findings and recommendations from the bottom-up was not always possible due to time and tenants' limited experience with conducting research, as highlighted in the previous section. To ensure the final results were comprehensive, the facilitators proposed additional findings and recommendations based on the data, literature review as well as the knowledge and experience from working with participatory budgeting in other contexts. They also edited and rewrote the material as necessary because participants often struggled with the task of clearly communicating evaluation results in written form.

One of the drawbacks of this intervention was the perceived ownership of tenants over the methodology. At times, it appeared that the tenants were accepting too much of what was proposed and were growing dependent on facilitator input. Some would also refer to the evaluation as the facilitator's research rather than their own. To work against these attitudes and perceptions, all methodological decisions were communicated to the tenant researchers and opened up for discussion to ensure transparency and accountability to the

participatory principals of the process. The tenants were also afforded the opportunity to revise and modify the facilitators' articulation of the findings and recommendations.

The analysis stage also included a feedback workshop with staff responsible for participatory budgeting but who could not participate in the earlier evaluation activities. The workshops aimed not only to share findings, but to also get ideas of how to move forward, what to change and not change, what new ideas to add, and, to identify recommendations or actions to improve the participatory budgeting process. The main reasons behind the inclusion of staff was to generate their support for the evaluation results, develop stronger findings and recommendations based on more diverse perspectives, and agree on recommendations that were actually feasible. According to Ryan et al. (1998, 113), "prescriptions are really only prescriptions if they are within the realm of the possible and those who must act on them see them as justifiable." At the same time, the opportunity to discuss initial findings and recommendations with key stakeholders was useful to test the validity of the data and correct any misconceptions or misrepresentations (Burke, 1998; Crishna, 2006). While this strategy is not perfect because people might attempt to "put on a good face," the information obtained was useful and inaccuracies were identified.

The feedback workshops were structured around tenant presentations of the findings and recommendations generated from the evaluation process and small group discussions to provide staff an efficient means to discuss, approve or change these results. Based on the post-workshop feedback, majority of the participants appreciated the inclusionary and interactive small group discussions. In their written comments, participants highlighted that the workshops provided "a really good chance to get deep into recommendations" and influence the evaluation of results (Anonymous, 2010). Most participants nonetheless believed that the tenant presentations did not effectively engage the audience. This view was echoed by one tenant researcher (E, 2010) stating, "I think we did a good job, but tenant participants were not well prepared and that turned off a lot of people." Indeed, the tenant researchers needed more preparation and support to effectively present the evaluation results; underscoring the reality that producing relevant knowledge is just as important as knowing how to present it.

Report Writing: The evaluation process culminated in a final version of the research report[7] based on the discussions and revisions from the evaluation workshops. It reviewed the purpose of the evaluation and the procedure and methods used, synthesized the list of findings, and identified the most important recommendations as viewed by both the participating stakeholders and the external evaluators. More notably, the findings were evidenced using quotes that represented the tenant and staff perspective to underscore the "stake" of both set of actors in the process.

No different from other participatory approaches to evaluations, most of the final report was written by the facilitators due to logistical constrains (Crishna, 2006). There were no workshops left for the meaningful participation of tenants in report writing. Instead, tenant researchers, along with some upper management staff, were offered opportunities to revise the final draft and provide input. In other words, whilst the stakeholders shaped the content of the report, the facilitators remained ultimately responsible for the reliability, validity and balance of the final results.

Lessons Learned about Evaluation Rigor

General staff feedback indicated that the participatory study resulted in quality findings and recommendations that were relevant to the organizational context and offered concrete actions for the planning and implementation of participatory budgeting. This was in no small part due to the strategies undertaken throughout the process to underpin the validity and reliability of the results. The evaluation team used multiple research methods (interviews, observations, surveys) and data sources (cross section of staff, tenants) to crosscheck information and assess their dependability. The study also sought participant feedback (or member checking) in the final workshops to gain insight as well as verify the researchers' interpretations and conclusions with other relevant stakeholders in the community. Indeed, these measures of methodological triangulation and member checking are widely used in qualitative research and proved compatible with the participatory needs of the evaluation approach.

The quality of results in the present evaluation was also defined by the need to achieve "balance" between the various stakeholder perspectives. Fairly and fully representing *all* legitimate interests and concerns, not just those of tenants, was understood as a means of

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[7] For 2009 and 2010 final report, see http://www.watsonblogs.org/participatorybudgeting/torontope.html

approaching a holistic understanding of the process as well as generating staff support for the results. For this purpose, similar to other practitioner accounts of participatory evaluation, the evaluation subjected all the claims, concerns and hidden value conflicts to open, participatory, group discussion processes (Ryan et al., 1998). This approach provided an opportunity for opening lines of communication between diverse groups so that more meaningful solutions could be found. However, the pluralistic nature of the evaluation could not have been sustained without facilitators seeking out diverse opinions and voices as well as actively promoting a degree of objectivity among tenant researchers.

The evaluation also required capacity building for tenant participants to ensure the effective collection of data and interpretation of findings. Participation in decisions regarding methodological aspects of an evaluation as well as its implementation presupposes a certain level of knowledge and familiarity with evaluation thinking and practice. As a result, workshop settings were embedded with interactive learning strategies as well as structured and framed discussions to help tenants to learn evaluation skills and thinking. Indeed, most tenants agreed that the activities and techniques helped them contribute meaningfully to the evaluation process and outputs. A tenant (B, 2010) acknowledged the challenges and benefits of such process by stating, "you took a whole group of undisciplined people and got them to think in a disciplined way. If you can harness the power of those people, you will get gold every time."

The vital role of external evaluators as teachers and facilitators in this process cannot be understated. They were instrumental in encouraging participation from everyone, ensuring understanding, sharing information and teaching research skills through imaginative and alternative strategies that kept the tenant researchers engaged. But it was also clear that the external facilitators could not manage without institutional support. The evaluation team was dependent on staff for access to information, valuable data as well as logistical accommodations. Without these structures of external support, there was unnecessary strain placed on the evaluation effort that distracted the process from more important objectives.

Finally, it is important to recognize the role played by facilitators as experts in shaping the evaluation process and ultimately the research results. Despite the effort undertaken to encourage participant control over the process, tenants required more time for learning and discussion, which became increasingly incompatible with getting quality outputs ready on time. These barriers did not necessarily threaten the quality of the design process and

products. The shared decision-making model used in the process gave facilitators considerable control over the structure and direction of the evaluation, and thus latitude to safeguard technical quality. These interventions nonetheless, threatened to undermine tenant ownership over the evaluation and to some extent, reinforced their dependency on external experts.

Despite the inherent tensions between process and product, the above account demonstrates that participation in evaluation can be compatible with meeting technical evaluation standards. It also elucidates some of the challenges that constrain participation and control over decision-making in real-life settings, while highlighting the need for creative engagement strategies as well as transparency around the intention and limitations of participatory evaluation. The next section will explore the outcomes of the evaluation to assess *if* and *how* the process contributed to the evaluation objectives.

IV: Outcomes of the Participatory Evaluation

The preceding sketches of the participatory budgeting evaluation demonstrate the nature of stakeholder participation in the case study as well as the process undertaken to ensure quality results. The following discussion will report and discuss the extent to which the expected and assumed outcomes of the evaluation were achieved, including capacity building and evaluation use. The section also aims to examine the underlying relationship between process and outcomes, to determine what factors shaped the impact of the evaluation. The conclusions will be based on both the perspective of external evaluators and participating stakeholders: staff as well as tenants.

Utilization of Evaluation Process and Products

When specifying their goals in conducting the evaluation, both management staff and tenant researchers wanted to foster a process that would promote the utilization of findings to improve the participatory budgeting process. The time frame for the current paper, however, did not allow opportunity to fully appreciate and document the actual instances of use. At the time of writing, staff had not begun the planning phase for the next cycle of the participatory budgeting process. Nevertheless, feedback from key staff and tenant researchers, contrasted with the literature on the dynamics of utilization, provided an initial

assessment of the potential impact of the evaluation, as well as roadblocks that may hamper the subsequent utilization of results.

More than the report, participant feedback from both evaluations highlighted the final workshops between tenant researchers and staff as particularly important in ensuring evaluation use. The workshops were structured around the presentation of evaluation findings and small groups discussions that allowed staff (hereto not directly involved in the process) to review and revise evaluation results. The activity afforded deeper discussion, reflection, and creative analysis of substantive program issues. Moreover, given the inclusion of staff with genuine decision-making roles, the discussions were oriented toward assisting with the initial stages of action planning for follow up by the organization. In other words, seeking stakeholder *action*, rather than *reaction*.

Interviews with staff participants indicate that this reflective, interactive and analytic component of participatory evaluation generated a number of cognitive benefits including increased staff processing and absorption of evaluative findings as well as learning about program issues. Specifically, stakeholder learning included deeper understanding of how participatory budgeting works and, insight on tenants' experience of the process:

> "when you are able to use the bit about how the research was conducted, and what they found, and the interactions they had… re-introducing that is great way to educate people on what [participatory budgeting] *is* and how we're doing it, but also to give people the idea of what the tenants are saying, what the client is basically saying about the product we're giving them…It helps them (staff) operationalize how they support [participatory budgeting]" (Staff D, 2010).

The active processing of evaluation information by participating users has found attention in the literature on evaluation use (Garaway, 1995). Cousins and Leithwood (1986, 332) argue "that the mere psychological processing of evaluation results constitutes use without necessarily informing decisions, dictating actions, or changing thinking as a consequence." Thus, the opportunities afforded to discussion and reflection can be linked to important *conceptual uses* of the process, including enhanced program understanding. Greene (1998, 111) on the other hand, furthers the argument by demonstrating that stakeholder learning can also generate a certain level of "stakeholder readiness for utilization that represents the core contribution of the participatory evaluation process to subsequent results utilization."

Indeed, the instrumental or "actual" use of evaluation results had been documented in the 2009 process as a direct consequence of the conceptual benefits resulting from the workshops. According to one manager, the action oriented discussions helped ensure that the evaluation findings informed program planning. In his own words, "this year was good, and I do think it has to do with the *brainwork* prior, you know with tenant group and staff... we gathered information, a lot of information from different perspectives, but then we put it together in a format that we'd like to use for 2010" (Staff E, 2010). As a result, action was taken regarding various issues highlighted in the report, including voting procedures, facilitation of meetings and particularly, the breakdown of staff roles and responsibilities. A project manager (D, 2010) described one of the clearest examples of actual evaluation use when he stated: "I literally took the page out [from the report] and sent it out and said: these are the rules."

The deliberate inclusion of a cross-section of staff responsible for the implementation of participatory budgeting was also highlighted as an important precursor for increasing the use of evaluation information. For some, the opportunity for staff to genuinely shape the final evaluation outputs heightened their perception of the results as credible, legitimate and persuasive. It could be argued, that these perceptions were also facilitated by the diversity and plurality of perspectives represented in the draft report. Thus, some tenant researchers and staff feel optimistic that the involvement of a cross-section of staff ensured their buy-in and subsequent use of results. In the words of one staff participant (B, 2010), "the evaluation created an opportunity for tenants and staff to learn together and work so at the end they see part of their ideas being reflected in the result... these opportunities foster greater investment and understanding in the evaluation and its results."

For similar reasons however, many remain skeptical about the potential of the 2010 evaluation. During the second year of the evaluation, there was a noted difference in the quality of staff participation. Throughout the process, there appeared to be a lack of awareness among local staff about the purpose of the evaluation and its relevance to their work. This observation was noted by one staff member (C, 2010), "it was a very different kind of involvement this time and different recognition from other staff that the evaluation was going on...a lot of staff might not have valued the evaluation, as an organization, we need to work on this." What is more, during the final workshops, not only was the

attendance of local and upper management staff lacking, those that attended did not appear actively engaged in the group discussion and activities.

Some tenant researchers interpreted the staff reaction as an indication of their weak investment in learning from the evaluation results: "I think staff is set in their ways; they are not open, they put on that vacant face, like there's nothing there" (Tenant B, 2010). For others, the notable absence of top management during the workshops implied a lack of commitment to the process and undermined the potential for evaluation use. One staff member (B, 2010) acknowledged, "we needed high level staff there that will make sure that [the recommendations] will be put in place." Right or wrong, these perspectives underscore the importance of the "personal factor" in the dynamics of results utilization highlighted in the literature: instances of participation and collaboration are insufficient to foster evaluation use if participants are not interested in, or do not appreciate, the value of the evaluation (Patton, 2005; Greene, 1988).

Considerations of Context

Some of the reasons behind the nature of staff involvement were accounted for earlier in the paper, including competing priorities and weak communication, suggesting perhaps the need for more flexible evaluation design. At the same time, the literature calls for greater attention on the crucial role of contextual variables in shaping and influencing the process and outcomes of the participatory evaluation (Cousins and Earl, 1992; Whitmore, 1998). Indeed, the present study found that the timing and turnover in leadership were notable factors that affected the quality of staff participation as well as the potential use of evaluation results.

For instance, external events usurped a lot of staff energy and directed organizational attention to other pressing priorities. At the time of the evaluation, Toronto Community Housing was facing an external review of its eviction practices due to an unfortunate incident that attracted significant media attention (Toronto Community Housing, 2010). One of the tenant researchers (B, 2010) lamented this reality: "I am afraid the [evaluation] report is going to be thrown to the side because of the Le Sage Report[8] – it has legal liability. Our report is the bottom priority." This indicates that the use of evaluation results might be

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[8] "Le Sage report" refers to the report that resulted form an independent, third party review of Toronto Community Housing's eviction practices, which was released to the public at the same time as the culmination of the 2010 participatory evaluation.

more contingent on the "politics of a situation" that redefine the valence of a particular issue, rather than the participatory nature of the evaluation process (King, 1995, 97).

In similar vein, participants noted that the principal hurdle for the evaluation was the administrative transition that took place in the middle of the 2010 evaluation. Indeed, changes in leadership shifted the particular objectives of the evaluation from what was initially envisioned:

> "We had a massive change in leadership over the last year. And the organizational context in which we are doing this work is really important. Some of the leadership changes has meant different organizational context, different set of priorities, and expectations that staff also are prioritizing differently" (Staff C, 2010).

Under the new leadership, it became increasingly clear that there were differences of opinion regarding the roles and responsibilities of staff, and about the perceived function, importance and value of the evaluation itself, specifically the 2010 process. Some project managers for instance, did not see the value in doing back-to-back evaluations:

> "There must be somebody somewhere who thought that the evaluation was equally important, so personally, from where I sit, I don't see the value in the evaluation because I don't feel there's enough time to have seen anything happen" (Staff D, 2010).

It is perhaps for these reasons the evaluation team found that as the evaluation progressed, project managers began to emphasize more the goal of capacity building and less the action component (building consensus around changes to participatory budgeting). When little usefulness of data was expected from the participatory evaluation, they rethought the process as capacity training for tenants.

For the new leadership, the process demands of participatory evaluation such as staff participation were also deemed unsuitable for the present organizational context. As one project manager (D, 2010) confided:

> "I think staff input is useful because its perspective, but staff evaluation doesn't work for me. To me, staff are more biased than tenants are because they feel like you're judging them to do their job whereas tenants at most are biased because of their ability to access something."

The same project manager also conceded that there was a lack of organizational readiness for the participatory demands of a participatory evaluation: "I just don't think we're built as a

corporation to give it the attention it needs – just don't have the staff, the money or what it takes to do it right" (Staff D, 2010). As a result, facilitators often found themselves alone in promoting and educating stakeholders on the benefits of participatory evaluation in producing key information for decision-making at all levels.

For many tenant participants and a few staff the lack of organizational support for participatory evaluation presents important obstacles for the subsequent use of evaluation results. As one upper management staff (A, 2010) noted: "you have to do [participatory evaluation] with a team of people that are going to make a difference… and for that you need the oversight of those that are responsible to whom those staff are accountable…when these things happen without leadership, it doesn't work." Leadership is identified as important to push change through an often obstinate organizational culture where "some people are not interested in change, don't want to disturb routine" (Staff B, 2010). Specifically, buy-in from top management is needed to motivate local staff to participate and prioritize the evaluation effort. Recognizing that "the dynamic changed within the organization," a tenant (A, 2010) added, "if you don't have them motivating others and spreading what [the evaluation] is about, it falls through and that's what happened this year."

Indeed, the literature has identified that a common determinant of successful experiences with participatory evaluation was the existence of a strong sustained and dynamic leadership to push the project forward (Rice and Franceschini, 2007). King (1998, 64) argues that participatory evaluation processes "need leaders who can attract or recruit people to the evaluation process, who will serve as idea champions, an who are willing to stay the course when things go wrong – as they inevitably do." Particularly in conventional hierarchal organizational settings, top managers must provide ongoing visible support by providing incentives like release during business hours, by attending training sessions and discussions, and by publicly celebrating the process's results (Cousins and Earl, 1992). According to Ryan et al. (1998, 114), "[w]ithout such sanctions and commitment, a participatory evaluation (like many other non-traditional evaluation alternatives) can be too readily marginalized and rendered ineffectual."

In the present example, it can be argued that the organizational context did not exhibit the leadership necessary to set the evaluation as a priority or to effectively communicate the purpose of the initiative throughout the hierarchy of staff. Lack of visible support and recognition from the top did not stimulate sufficient buy-in from the bottom to

generate the necessary participation and attention from staff. Furthermore, the sense of partnership and close cooperation between tenants, staff and facilitators originally envisioned was only minimally present throughout the project. At the end, these conditions challenged not only the implementation of the participatory evaluation in terms of organizational support and resources, but also acted as contextual barrier between participation and results utilization.

Organizational Learning

Beyond the utilization of evaluation results, the facilitators also hoped that the participatory evaluation would stimulate organizational interest in evaluations and build the capacity of program staff to continue participatory evaluations, or research, with tenants. Due to lack of staff involvement in the technical tasks of the process, it was difficult to facilitate learning either on evaluative practices or participatory approaches to research. Yet, the few that did actively participate, albeit in a supportive role, expressed an enhanced readiness to embrace stakeholder involvement in evaluations: "the whole (participatory) criteria thing, having *that* around methodology, that was very valuable, that I can take away. I am thinking about the folks that need to be involved in the evaluation of my other projects. For the scope of my work its essential" (Staff B, 2010).

Facilitators also ensured that the data gathering tools the team developed were documented in the report to help mainstream evaluation in the participatory budgeting process. Although project managers are not planning to apply participatory evaluation in the near future, they hope to implement some of the evaluation tools, particularly surveys, as an ongoing component of participatory budgeting "to flag any issues that come up" (Staff D, 2010) But at the last workshops, staff had a hard time determining how to incorporate evaluation responsibilities into their everyday routine. Furthermore, some staff noted that the organization needed to invest in a system that could facilitate ongoing reflection and learning. Evaluation activities need to be systematically documented and data stored so that others may build on preceding experiences rather than always blazing a new trail.

The constraints to organizational learning highlighted above underscore some of the limits encountered in other case applications of participatory evaluations (Cousins & Earl, 1995b). Indeed, according to some authors, capacity building in evaluation should be an ongoing institutional practice and priority for organizational learning to take effect (Greene,

2000; Forss et al., 2006). It is difficult to make a sustainable difference by way of a singular external evaluation with minimal staff involvement in program evaluation activities as in the present case. Staff might be more able to integrate evaluation skills into everyday work activities and use them for reflection and learning if a supportive organizational environment reinforces such practices and provides release time for evaluation activities.

Building Capacity

It is not easy to provide a clear answer to the question whether the evaluation process was successful in building evaluation capacity through participation. Whether people did or did not learn depended much on the circumstances, expectations, participants' willingness to engage, as well as on the capacity of the facilitators to respond. What is more, beyond explicit manifestations of knowledge, it is often difficult to assess the full extent of stakeholder learning (Forss et al., 2006). Nevertheless, tenant researchers did find that the hands-on experience of evaluation allowed them to build and strengthen skills and knowledge related to, and transferable beyond, evaluation practice. At the same time, due to practical issues such as timing and team composition, tenants did not develop the evaluation capacity to lead similar projects without external support or guidance.

Reflecting on their participatory experience, tenant researchers often described how the opportunity to conduct the evaluation as a team helped them learn how to work collectively with others, which was not always an easy feat. As expressed by a tenant researcher (C, 2010): "I learned to work with different people…people I have a difference with…to be more patient and open minded especially in such an intimate environment." Some tenants also revealed that one of their biggest barriers to participation was the inability to communicate ideas in an effective and persuasive manner. But through practice and various vehicles for discussion and deliberation, many felt that they have improved in this regard:

> "the evaluation taught me to be specific…because what I might be thinking about something, can be taken differently" (Tenant C, 2010).

> "there was an educational component where tenant researchers through group work experienced different types of communication. In other words, some people learned how to communicate better thanks to the evaluation" (Tenant E, 2010).

In terms of evaluation capacity, the tenant participants pointed out that the "fun" and didactic activities embedded in the process were particularly instrumental in helping them develop evaluation skills and thinking. "Because we had to actively participate in it, it gave us a better idea of what research means and how to do it," one tenant (E, 2010) explained. In particular, tenants found that doing research has allowed them to effectively contribute to participatory budgeting. They are writing and talking about the process more broadly, not just focusing on details or specific problems. What is more, they have learned to bridge tenant and staff perspectives to identify practical improvements to the participatory budgeting process.

Many tenant researchers are also finding their new skills and workshop activities transferable to work in other tenant and community groups and believe the participatory methodology can be an effective tool to develop capacity in the tenant community. According to one tenant (D, 2010) "participatory evaluation is important for growing, and learning, so that good bases can form in the community." For another tenant (E, 2010), the transfer of knowledge was apparent when "starting up a community garden, part of doing research, is using those ideas that I got [from the participatory evaluation] to get a better understanding of tenants and how they work... If tenants are not part of the process, they will have little interest in the outcome of what you are doing."

It is unlikely however, that tenant researchers will be able to carry out evaluations of participatory budgeting in the absence of continued support from external experts or staff. Tenants still lack comprehensive knowledge of research methods, technical skills and remain considerably dependent on the facilitators. A few top management staff expressed disappointed with these "limited returns" in tenant capacity building, although they lacked clear indices to judge the results. They were also unclear whether these outcomes are attributed to the evaluation design or tenant selection. As a staff (C, 2010) noted, "I almost feel that people going into it should have been coming out with a stronger set of skills and analysis. Maybe that speaks to the researchers to some extent and everything else they are involved in and their motive for involvement. It's hard to say."

At the same time, similar case studies underscore the reality that learning for capacity building takes time, practice and iteration (Schnoes et al., 2000; Forss et al., 2006). Not everyone can develop into a capable researcher within the limited time frame of a participatory evaluation project. What is more, the tensions between process and product

that characterize participatory evaluation indicate that learning will not always be prioritized over the delivery of outputs. Accordingly, encouraging capacity building through participation necessitates continuing opportunities for tenant participants to strengthen learned skills (Cousins and Earl, 1999). Unfortunately, due to the improbability that participatory evaluation will be repeated in the near future, it is unclear whether capacity building among participating tenants will be sustained in the present organizational context.

Alternatives: Agents of Change?

In many ways, the experiences described above underscore the structures of power that underlie the evaluation process in the present organizational context. Staff remains in control over the planning and implementation of participatory budgeting as well as the future of participatory evaluation at Toronto Community Housing. Thus, the lack of staff participation and limited organizational support places real constraints on the impact of the evaluation over program decision-making. At the same time, it is important to recognize that power dynamics are not necessarily deterministic and participants as well as facilitators can play a role as agents of change. For instance, facilitators invested significant effort in tenant ownership over the process and encouraged them to formulate their own strategies for action. In no small part, inviting participation in all aspects of the evaluation including more technical data collection and analysis phase built up tenants' feelings of responsibility for the evaluation as well as the participatory budgeting process.

As a result, some of the tenants are taking initiative to disseminate evaluation findings in the available spaces for tenant engagement. A tenant (B, 2010) admitted, "I started to take over the torch because you said: we won't be here next year." Some even contend that "if tenants are vocal, it will have more of an impact than if staff are vocal" (Tenant C, 2010). Indeed several tenant researchers have presented the evaluation results at tenant committee meetings and advocated for particular recommendations using their membership in participatory budgeting monitoring groups. Although it remains to be seen whether this form of "activism" will influence decision-making process, tenant researchers are making *symbolic use* of evaluation results to persuade organizational change or at least, share experiences and learnings with the wider community.

Not all however, share the same enthusiasm about the impact of their participation. Over the course of the evaluation, a few tenant participants grew increasingly disillusioned

with the process due to the perceived lack of organizational commitment and support for their work. For some, perceived staff non-action confirmed the exclusion of tenants from program decision-making:

> "I gave up…even though the organization has opened up the opportunity for community to make decisions, at the end, it's still a corporate decision…we go through the whole participatory evaluation process, we make recommendations and finally its all up to them [staff], if anything gets implemented at all" (Tenant A, 2010).

As a result, many tenant participants exhibited diminishing morale throughout the process and some have expressed the reluctance to participate again in similar endeavors.

These diverging tenant reactions impart two important insights for the practice of participatory evaluation. Similar to other participatory processes, for a participatory evaluation to promote and sustain participation among participants, it is important that the evaluation be able to meet stakeholder goals and result in concrete action (Fung and Wright, 2003). Otherwise, it becomes disempowering for participants to contribute so many hours to a process that was not ultimately useful on an individual or organizational level. At the same time, community participation and shared control in all phases of the evaluation process can generate a sense of project ownership that inspires participants to take initiative and make use of the evaluation results (Garaway, 1995). This process use cannot be ignored as a potential means to promote action or change when other avenues are less responsive.

The above experiences and discussion also underscore the important role played by external evaluators in "facilitating" the link between participation and action. They actively advocated for the participatory evaluation and worked for the inclusion of voices traditionally excluded from evaluation efforts. The discussion of advocacy within the practice mode draws criticism of "non-objectivity" and "stakeholder coziness" that can compromise the perceived credibility and persuasiveness of evaluative claims. Participatory evaluators however contend that no evaluations can be neutral; all advance some values and ideals (Brisolara, 1998). According to Lincoln (cited in Ryan et al., 1998, 109), "in participatory evaluation, this value commitment is to democratic pluralism, to broadening the policy conversation to include all legitimate perspectives and voices, and to full and fair stakeholder participation in policy and program decision-making." In the present Toronto Community Housing case, evaluator advocacy was not meant to "take sides" in the specific

sense, but rather to encourage an open, inclusive and engaged conversation among stakeholders about how to improve and maximize the efforts of their participatory program.

Summary and Conclusion

The empirical investigation described above demonstrates some of the benefits attributable to the participatory evaluation model. The approach produced knowledge relevant to the local setting and to some extent, facilitated the conceptual and instrumental use of the evaluation process and product. It also demonstrated a positive impact on tenant learning, internal group processes and tenant commitment to participatory budgeting. The paper also drew important lessons about the circumstances and conditions that either facilitated or challenged both the process and impact of the evaluation. The following section will summarize these lessons, integrating prior literature on participatory evaluations, to critically assess the approach as a viable evaluation choice for participatory processes, particularly in organizational settings such as Toronto Community Housing.

Stakeholders: who should participate? The question of *who* should participate in the inquiry team depends largely on the objectives set for the project as well as the particular constraints of the local setting. The goals of the study aimed to both increase the use of evaluation results as well as contribute to tenant capacity and ownership over the evaluative endeavor so that they can become active actors in the future of the participatory process. As a result, the inclusion of program beneficiaries (tenants) was necessary to both represent the tenant experience of participatory budgeting and allow a few tenant participants to learn about the participatory process while strengthening their evaluation skills and thinking. The participation of program staff however remained crucial to ensure evaluation results were grounded in the needs and constraints of the local setting and to facilitate the link between evaluation findings and program decision-making. As in the literature, the study confirms that stakeholders with organizational clout i.e. persons in a position do something about the findings, are instrumental to ensuring evaluation use and organizational learning (Cousins and Earl, 1995a; Cousins and Whitmore, 1998).

Pitfalls of Participation: Whilst stakeholder participation presents many benefits, the study also demonstrates that the simple notion of "offering" opportunities for participation is weak. Lack of experience, apathy, dependency on experts, and simple lack of time often render involved parties incapable of effective participation in decision-making

(King, 1995). Further, stakeholders must commit to a level of responsibility for the evaluation effort that may be greater than that required in more traditional approaches. More discerning stakeholder selection could be one way to recruit motivated and experienced participants. But the process also requires incentive structures such as funding, release from routine tasks and formal recognition to facilitate stakeholder participation in the evaluation effort (Cousins and Earl, 1992).

More importantly, the study and literature confirm the need for training activities in technical research skills not only for the purposes of capacity building, but also to generate meaningful stakeholder participation in evaluation tasks (Forss et al., 2006). Planning for evaluations of this nature needs to give time for learning, sharing and transfer of skills, and exchange of perspectives (King, 2005). The evaluation methods and structures also have to be flexible and have the ability to be changed and adapted constantly. What is more, facilitators must incorporate imaginative ways to ensure that the learning is not only accessible and effective, but also compatible with evaluation activities to generate quality results (Crishna, 2006).

Tensions between Process and Product: In the case study, participation proved compatible with the need to ensure the validity and reliability of evaluation results. Facilitators adopted creative means of structuring stakeholder participation around such strategies as triangulation and member checking, which maintained the integrity of the findings. Nonetheless, the constraints of time did generate tensions between meaningful participation and quality outputs. The time-line for the evaluation did not allow for sufficient participant learning and as a result, facilitators retained some authority over the evaluation process and its results. Participatory evaluators seem to be comfortable with this reality, encouraging practitioners to "think smaller" and stop envisioning participatory evaluation in absolutist terms – full scale participation or none at all (Ryan et. al, 1998). They need to accept imperfections and develop smaller ways to implement the value commitment to participatory evaluation, particularly in settings that may have different ideals or stances (Cousins and Earl, 1995b). Yet, as exemplified in the study, decisions over methodology also need a level transparency and accountability to uphold the integrity of the process in the eyes of the participants, organization and outside community (Crishna, 2006).

General Usefulness: Evaluation Use: Beyond stakeholder involvement, the study demonstrates that the relationship between participation and evaluation use is less

contingent on the final report, but more on the process dimensions of the approach (Garaway, 1995). The opportunities for staff to discuss, deliberate and influence the final results were directly attributed to the conceptual use of the evaluation, which in some cases generated positive contributions to the actual application of evaluation findings in program decision-making. In other words, the dialogic component appears to contribute to a learning phase that reinforced staff understanding and acceptance of findings, and consequently greater responsiveness to the results (Greene, 1988). Perhaps if staff were involved to the same extent as tenants in the evaluation they might have developed a greater sense of responsibility and obligation to follow through on the recommendations. But the "personal factor" also plays an important role in evaluation use (Patton, 2000). Many staff members were either not committed, not informed or did not know how to contribute to or benefit from the evaluation process. Thus, when designing participatory evaluations, facilitators and organizations need to ensure that participating stakeholders are motivated or find means to encourage personal interest in the process either through educational workshops or improved communication.

Enabling conditions and contingencies: These issues of motivation also suggest that certain enabling conditions or contextual prerequisites need to be in place for meaningful participatory evaluation to flourish. In the present study, factors such as organizational support, leadership and political climate conditioned not only the evaluation process but also its impact. The facilitators depended significantly on external support to carry out the evaluation, including logistical accommodations, honorariums and access to valuable data. Organizations or institutions interested in participatory evaluations must come to terms with the realities of participation and make necessary the appropriate resources and administrative commitment (Cousins and Earl, 1995b). It helps to have these terms explicitly communicated, understood and accepted by all actors at the outset of the evaluation and renegotiated if circumstances change.

Strong leadership that values and champions the goals of the evaluation in the organization is also recognized as an important enabler of the process (King, 1995; Rice et al., 2007). These players can help the process navigate through organizational politics, educate stakeholders on the benefits and appropriateness of participatory evaluations, and assist the process in the face of adversity or unsuspected contingencies. At the same time, it is important to recognize that institutions, and individuals need time and iteration to adapt a

new methodology that demands changes in how they function and work. Thus, for participatory evaluations to make a sustainable difference, organizations need to incorporate the approach as an ongoing practice and be committed to learning from evaluations (Gregory, 2000).

Role of Evaluators/Facilitators: External evaluators/facilitators in this context require a great deal of imagination and skill to manage the technical aspects of research in a way that is accessible to all the players in the process. What is more, they must devote as much energy to the human and political side of the evaluations, as they do to the scientific. As a result, participatory evaluators transcend the edict of expert-novice professional relationship and assume non-traditional roles as teachers, facilitators and advocates (Herrera et al, 2009; Scarcini et al., 2009). As teachers, they must find ways to translate formal evaluation and training into accessible tools for participant learning. As facilitators, they have to adopt imaginative ways to foster dialogue and move participation towards the deliverance of valid results. As advocates, they become power brokers that negotiate between the needs of the evaluation and the organization. At the end, facilitators constitute the most important "tools" of participatory evaluation: building trust and productive partnerships with stakeholders in order to yield a meaningful and effective participatory evaluation experience (De Luca et al., 2009).

Question of Power: Finally it's important to highlight how power dynamics impacted the outcomes of participatory evaluation both from a practical and empowerment perspective. In the study, the attitude of staff towards participatory evaluation reinforced the asymmetrical power relations in the organization and curtailed the direct influence tenant researchers had over program decision-making. At the same time, structures of power in themselves should not be seen as factors discouraging the use of the approach. Power is an element in all evaluations, but does not constitute fixed boundaries (Rebien, 1996). Through participation, tenant researchers gained a stronger appreciation of participatory budgeting and increased ownership over the evaluation that motivates them to push for change as tenant advocates. External evaluators also exercised their influence to promote the value of participatory evaluations as a constructive approach for participatory processes. Although the impact of these strategies *for* power remains unclear, it does highlight the possible benefits of exploring the productive elements of power to find ways of working that can overcome some of the constraints facing the less powerful in similar settings.

The paper aimed to critically assess the application of participatory evaluation and to critically assess the viability of the approach to evaluating participatory processes. The study yielded positive results: the knowledge produced was directly relevant to the local setting, staff were to some extent motivated to implement the results and tenants started to assume greater agency over the participatory process. While appreciating these benefits, it is essential to keep in mind that not all contexts are suitable for the approach. Participating evaluators, stakeholders and organizations need to be prepared for the demands of the process in terms of time, resources and commitment. What is more, participatory evaluation cannot be a singular exercise, it needs continuity and long-term investment for people to learn and accept its rationale and form. Once they do, the impact can be both practical and empowering.

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