Engaging Marginalized Communities: Honoring Voices and Empowering Change
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In January of 2010, the Social Planning Network of Ontario (SPNO) provided leadership to an integrated and cross-sectoral collaborative initiative which aimed to identify and engage priority populations in community-based planning activities taking place within the Healthy Communities Fund strategy. The project also sought to document key principles for engaging marginalized populations in community-based planning processes that were respectful, inclusive and built on the knowledge and insights of peoples’ lived experience. Funded by the Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport’s Healthy Communities Fund, Provincial Stream, the SPNO project was comprised of four local initiatives led by social planning partners in Sudbury, Peterborough, Halton and Waterloo Region. Project leads at each of the four sites planned their local community engagement activities using the principles and approaches cited in the published literature, and then elaborated on these concepts based on their local experiences and insights. In this issue of in depth, Rishia Burke, project lead with the Halton project, describes her involvement with this initiative and what she learned about working with, and engaging marginalized community members in the process.

Understanding the meaning of marginalized

When I started as a team member in a provincial pilot project last year entitled Engaging Marginalized Communities for Better Health Outcomes, I felt concerned about the title, specifically the word...
“marginalized”, fearing that those whom I was about to reach out to would be offended. My pilot setting for the project was in Halton, a community with significant affluence. Where the gap between rich and poor is very significant and those living in poverty are hidden. The rich and poor live in different worlds, and appear to have little in common.

The focus of the community engagement project in this instance was the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport’s Healthy Communities Ontario strategy which was establishing inclusive, community-based planning process to create local plans and policies for the reduction of chronic disease risk factors and conditions.

Field work for the Halton project took place in food banks, at community suppers and other safe community spaces, where I would introduce myself and explain the project. Those who were living in marginalized situations did not seem to mind the word “marginalized”. In fact, in time I realized it was a good description of how a person living in poverty experiences community or in many cases how they are not able to have an experience community; feeling left out, un-consulted, ignored, unacknowledged and in most cases not involved in the broader community. One young woman told me:

“I just want to feel like I belong in this community”

She summed up well the social exclusion that comes with marginalization.

People living in poverty told me throughout the project to “just tell it like it is”. Their stories speak to the daily struggle to survive on low incomes leading to, inadequate housing, chronic hunger and mental health issues; all interrelated factors and reflecting the social determinants of health, and all contributing to their social exclusion. However, there are also stories of heroes, solidarity, and many gifts that people have to contribute. There it is, my middle class sensibilities no longer offended by the word marginalized, but enlightened.

The insights shared here have been gleaned from the experience of this past year, time which was spent learning first-hand from people struggling on the margins of civic society.

What do we mean by engagement?
The word engagement may be on the brink of becoming another one of those over-used words: with each application it loses a bit of its meaning. Since the 1960s, the literature on community engagement has referred to a continuum of participation and engagement, from reception of information to participation in actual decision-making. In a very recent @ a Glance publication, Lorna McCue (2011), highlighted an engagement model that is often applied in community-based health promotion and includes: informing, consulting, collaborating and empowering as four key levels of engagement.

The essence of community engagement is to involve or generate participation, drawing people together on common issues or interests. The key to successful community engagement is how that happens: what process is used, how that participation makes people feel and what is done with the information gleaned from people and communities.
The SPNO's Engaging Marginalized Communities project cast the four level framework for community engagement as follows:

This framework was developed based on a literature review specific to engaging marginalized populations within the context of working towards fully engaging people from marginalized situations in public planning processes.

Throughout the project, team members regularly reflected on what we were learning from our individual field work in four different communities. We found that it was critical to be working at the shared planning and shared decision-making levels on the engagement continuum to ensure that the process was meaningful, valued people's contributions, and supported participation in an ongoing way.

Theoretical Grounding for Engaging Marginalized Communities

Engaging marginalized populations requires delicate and careful practice. **Marginalization** is a process by which a group or individual is denied access to important positions and symbols of economic, religious or political power within any society. A marginal group may actually constitute a numerical majority- as in the case of Blacks in South Africa- and should perhaps be distinguished from a "minority group, which may be small in numbers, but has access to political or economic power. (Rittel, 1972)

There are numerous theories or concepts that one might draw from when working with marginalized communities. Although not an exhaustive list, some to consider are: capacity building, empowerment, citizen engagement, social inclusion, social capital and social justice. The concepts are often interconnected. Some common, important elements among these concepts include:

- Focusing on processes that recognize and value the contribution of individual's skills and gifts;
- Providing opportunities that facilitate capacity development among individuals, groups and communities; and
- Working with stakeholders to build partnerships and collaborations based on equal relationships and trust.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & SHARING POWER**

Service providers have not always asked or encouraged all members of community to participate in planning and public discussions. For marginalized community members this has lead to feelings of mistrust and exclusion. As a result, when we realize that certain voices are missing from the public conversation, we must first develop a relationship to be able to fully engage those missing from the conversation, and find ways to level out the inherent power imbalance that exists between marginalized individuals and the soliciting service providers or professionals.

Relationship building is essential for engaging with marginalized communities. This can be done through simple questions: asking people about what is going on with them, what is good or not so good
about the community they live in. If approached sensitively, asking some simple questions is usually well received, people do not find this intrusive or offensive, but are most often willing to share.

During the Halton Engaging Marginalized Communities project, I spent six months conducting community soundings, meeting with people in their own community spaces such as community suppers, neighbourhood BBQs, coffee shops, and spending time before talking with people while they waited at food banks. In some cases I visited two to three times there was enough trust built for me to ask questions about people’s life circumstances. If I had been introduced by a trusted service provider or by a community member, less time was required to begin the conversation about what was going well and not well for them and their family.

Relationship building doesn’t stop with learning more about someone else; we need to be willing to share as well, not just our job title and our project objectives, but something about ourselves; the passion behind our work, the family that supports us or hobbies. Depending on the circumstance, I offered up information about my background growing up in a single-parent family and the associated financial struggles and about my family’s experience with mental health issues and navigating the system for help. I shared many parenting stories along with others as we talked about our children. Relationships are two-way. When we do this, we lose a bit of control, which although might be scary, is a great first step towards shared power.

John McKnight teaches that community organizing that gets to the heart of democracy, and builds strong communities always starts with the identification of gifts, strengths or assets; those things that people associate around, the things that draw people together for positive change McKnight also notes the value of hospitality. This is the act of welcoming people in from the outside. (McKnight, 2010)

Service providers do not always readily welcome marginalized people into their networks. Meetings are held in places that are not welcoming or that may not “feel safe”, and often in places where marginalized community members cannot even get to because of transportation barriers. Effective community engagement practice happens out in the community where people live and associate.

### KEY STEPS TO ENGAGING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES:

1. Take time to build relationships and trust
2. Involve people in meaningful ways
3. Tap into and build on peoples’ strengths
4. Enable people to participate; meet at convenient times; offer childcare and transportation options
Once out in the community, relationships and shared power develop when the following occurs:

- **People are involved in a meaningful ways.**
  - This step is a demonstration of the recognition and respect we have for peoples’ gifts and contributions;
- **There are opportunities to develop and build on peoples’ existing skills**
  - Investing in people’s development and capacity-building;
- **Trust has been built**
  - This can be done by sharing information. Information is power. When we share power, we build trust.
- **There are assurances that the work will lead to something.**
  - Making sure that the effort and contribution leads to change is important for sustained engagement and also helps build trust.
- **People are supported to overcome challenges in order to participate**
  - People living in marginalized situations face many challenges requiring the removal of barriers to participation. Practical solutions include: paying for bus and/or taxis, holding meetings right where people live and offering child care.
- **People are first mobilized as individuals and they invite others to join, resulting in collective action**
  - A test of an initiative’s success can be how easily it “scales up” to attract others. Look at whether or not the trust that has been built is strong enough to result in those involved inviting others to join in.
- **Relationship building is a process**
  - Be patient; this takes time.

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**Approaches to engaging with marginalized communities**

In Halton, the *Engaging Marginalized Communities* project used a community–based, participatory research approach to engage local participants as community leaders on reflecting the lived experience of people with higher health risks. Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), sometimes referred to as Participatory Action Research (PAR), is a methodology in which research professionals and members of a specific community work together as equal partners in the development, implementation, and dissemination of research relevant to the community.

**ENGAGING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES PROJECT KEY STEPS:**

1. Conducted Community Soundings
2. Identification of Leaders through Community Sounding experiences
3. Survey developed by social planner and implemented by Community Survey Team
4. Two Community Conversations conducted by the social planner and some of the Community Survey team to validate and clarify the survey results
The Halton Health Department provided additional funding for the Halton Engaging Marginalized Communities pilot project as part of its own Healthy Communities Partnership engagement strategy. This lead to a process that involved hiring, training and supporting a Community Survey Team made up of fifteen community members, who had been identified as being local leaders and having strong networks to tap into to reach those living in low income. Team members engaged peers in a survey process in five communities throughout Halton Region. Community Survey Team members reached people with whom they had a strong relationship through volunteer roles, social service and church program involvement, as well as through informal social networks, far beyond the network of the project staff.  

**During one of the community soundings, a community member explained that her life is in crisis because she can’t pay the rent and is about to be evicted.** As a result, she uses food banks so that she can put as much towards housing as possible, but when she goes into food banks she is made to feel awful about herself, being scolded because she needs help more than once a month. This further exacerbates her mental health issues, which is the reason she is not able to work and not able to pay her rent in the first place. (Edwardh, Burke, and Lau, 2011).

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**The Benefits of Engaging Marginalized Groups**

The Engaging Marginalized Communities project experience has resulted in capacity building, individual empowerment, and new and strengthened partnerships based on information provided by those involved. The engagement process has developed some community champions and a solid base of community-generated evidence on key social determinants of health on which to organize for change. Some of the Community Survey Team members remain active in continuing to share the results and the priorities with other service providers and other decision-makers through a variety of presentations.
In general, the benefits of engaging marginalized community members include:

- Obtaining valuable information and knowledge from community members on local issues that is not available elsewhere;
- Getting specific feedback that helps ensure that programs, services and policies are reflective of community needs;
- Community ownership of local information that leads to change;
- Identifying local solutions that can lead to neighbourhood building;
- Helping to ensure that planning processes are transparent and accountable;
- Developing local capacity and leadership;
- Raising community awareness of their own rights and responsibilities;
- Providing opportunities for networking and learning from one another across communities;
- Increasing social inclusion;
- Increasing equitable access to programs or services regardless of income; and
- Increasing interest and capacity to mobilize the community to influence public policy.

Challenges

Working with marginalized communities can pose practical challenges for those leading community planning efforts.

- Communication can be challenging, as not everyone has a phone or e-mail; this requires knocking on someone’s door to check in.
- Many people living in poverty are in their current economic situation because of health issues, which means that they need to take the project at their own pace, without worrying about time pressures. Patience and time are key factors in this work.
- Transportation can be a significant issue; especially where transit systems do not connect across communities or in some case don’t exist at all and those involved do not have or cannot afford to drive their car.
- Be aware of other, ongoing planning and engagement activities. There may be more than one group working on some of the same issues, and approaching a community for input, feedback or participation. This can be confusing to community members.
- The information, insights and suggested strategies which may arise when engaging marginalized populations can challenge the “status quo”. Taking new, difficult or complex issues into account may make planning and decision-making even more complex and time-consuming for stakeholder and decision-makers.
Engaging Marginalized Communities in Policy Development

Engaging with marginalized communities will naturally lead to the identification of issues that warrant advocacy, policy change or policy development. DeSantis (2010) provides a set of clear conditions that influence the participation of marginalized people in advocacy work; these include:

- Service providers perceptions of marginalized populations and their understanding of the participation barriers described above;
- The willingness and ability of social service agencies to engage in policy development work; and their capacity to do this, including their resources, community credibility and where this fits in terms of priorities;
- The receptivity of relevant government funders to this work; and
- The communities themselves including the size of the community, and its values related to issues such as poverty, youth or newcomer challenges.

When policy development is done in a way that engages marginalized people in a meaningful way, it creates social inclusion, a place to belong and opportunity to contribute. By including the voices of marginalized populations in public discussions around policies that affect their lives, we can move forward toward reducing health inequities.

In Summary

Reaching out and working with members of marginalized communities in a respectful, inclusive, strength-based approach requires that those of us in leadership or coordinating roles carefully consider how we relate and work with people who are currently “marginalized” in some way. We need to find ways that we can comfortably and authentically share ourselves in order to build trusting relationships, which in turn allow honest, open discussion. In our roles as professionals or “paid staff” we must find and act on appropriate opportunities to share power with those who currently experience less or no access to information, resources or decision-making. The community engagement principles, strategies and activities outlined above, can guide our efforts to work with marginalized communities in more egalitarian ways. This will not only build individuals’ and community’s capacities, but allows the specific issues, challenges and solutions articulated by marginalized individuals, to be fully considered and incorporated within a community planning process.

The community engagement principles, strategies and activities outlined above, can guide our efforts to work with marginalized communities in more egalitarian ways.
CAPACITY BUILDING
Capacity build may be developed with individuals, groups of people, teams, and organizations and in broader communities. Work done at one level frequently contributes to the capacity development at another level (Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, 2002). The “raw material for community-building is the capacity of its individual members” (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). When people’s capacities (e.g. gifts, skills) are recognized, further developed and there are opportunities to contribute, people can be meaningfully engaged.

EMPOWERMENT
This is an ongoing process where people can move from being vulnerable and with no choice or control, to gaining knowledge and skill and ultimately control and autonomy (Aria, 1997) gaining resources and having their assets and gifts recognized (McCloskey et al, 2011). Empowerment should be a process and an outcome of a community engagement initiative.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT
Citizen engagement values the right of citizens to have an informed say in the decisions that affect their lives. It emerges from the idea of public participation. Citizen engagement emphasizes the sharing of power, information, and a mutual respect between government and citizens (Sheedy, 2008). Civic engagement is based on the premise that people have the capacity to solve their own problems, and that change will include partnerships, collaboration, leadership development and inclusive processes (W.K. Kellogg Foundation).

SOCIAL INCLUSION
Social inclusion is about making sure that all children and adults are accepted and able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society. Freiler in Clutterbuck and Novick (2003) notes the difference between exclusion which is the marginalization of those who are seen as different, inferior and/or vulnerable; whereas inclusion recognizes “how we are all alike as humans”; standing for what “bind us together.” (p.4) Social inclusion is also a process and an outcome in a community engagement process.

SOCIAL CAPITAL
Social capital can be thought of in terms of the features of social life, networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. (Putnam, 1993). The literature identifies three main strategies in the formation of social capital:

- Bonding strategies that build trust and cooperation among individuals and within communities.
- Bridging strategies that break down barriers across groups and communities and enable collaborative action on shared objectives.
- Scaling-up strategies that connect communities in collective action for social change and development at the policy and/or systems levels.

SOCIAL JUSTICE
Social justice is associated with the principles of equity, solidarity and human rights. It refers to the idea of creating a society or institution that is based on those principles and one that recognizes the dignity of every human being.
References


 Listserves and Websites

**CBPR LIST SERVE**
A list serve focused on Community-Based Participatory Research
http://mailman2.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/cbpr

**JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION**
The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an endowed charity that funds a large, UK-wide research and development programme. We seek to understand the root causes of social problems, to identify ways of overcoming them, and to show how social needs can be met in practice. http://www.jrf.org.uk/

**PG EXCHANGE**
PG Exchange is an initiative of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The website provides information on increasing the influence of citizens and civil society organizations in governance processes. The website provides numerous fact sheets on citizen engagement and policy development http://www.pgexchange.org/

**PHOTOVOICE**
PhotoVoice is described as participatory photography for social change. http://www.photovoice.org/

**ST. JAMES TOWN INITIATIVE**
A Toronto based project that includes PhotoVoice, videos and participatory mapping as engagement approaches. http://sjtinitiative.com/

**WINNIPEG CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES**
This branch of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has established a reputation with a collaborative research model working with community organizations researching Winnipeg inner city and Aboriginal issues. Their publications provide an number great examples of community participatory research approaches. http://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications

Other Helpful Documents


The Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries web site includes two documents from the Waterloo Region Pilot Site of the Engaging Marginalized Communities, including the literature review and final report which focuses on immigrant women http://www.socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org/

Wellesley Institute’s website provides a large variety of publications and resources, including three working papers on peer research in action. http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/uncategorized/peer-research-in-action/

Videos and other On-Line Tools

FOR US, BY US: PEER RESEARCH 101
A link to a web cast that documents the work of the Toronto Community-Based Research Network (partners include: Wellesley Institute, Access Alliance CHC, OWHN, Planned Parenthood Toronto, and Street Health). This video features the voices of community members who have worked on community-based research projects in the Toronto area. They discuss how and why they became involved in research, what they did, as well as some of the benefits and challenges of this kind of work. http://www.vimeo.com/2780761

VIDEOS FROM THE Coady INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
A video with Jim Diers speaking about citizen action related to community shifts in working with/in partnership with government to make local change. The video provides examples of grass-roots, neighbourhood level action in Seattle through a matching grant program and then a broader base municipal neighbourhood planning approach. (2010)

Part 1: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31a8wkHgJJc

MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE PROJECT
The Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) in Buffalo is the host to the Growing Green Program, a youth development and urban agriculture program focused on increasing healthy food access and improving the community. The program and policy work is all about making our food system more local and inclusive. The web site is found at http://www.mass-ave.org/

Solutions implemented through the project include a mobile market, an urban agricultural training program, local youth food-based businesses, and an aquaponic project. The following is a video that details the aquaponic project. http://vimeo.com/14435813

The University of Buffalo has been working with MAP to develop a food system plan for the area. The report is found at: http://www.mass-ave.org/Food%20for%20Growth.pdf

NEW TOWN, USA COMMUNITY BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT
This video shows the phases in mobilizing, training and implementation of a community-based survey project run through the Health Planning
Council of Northeast Florida
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KE5nVPCB6F0

POVERTY FREE HALTON. BEING POOR IN HALTON
A video that details the cost of living in Halton for a working poor family of four. It details the cost of many of the social determinants of health.
http://www.cdhalton.org

DO THE MATH SURVEY
An on-line program to take you through the process of budgeting within the context of social assistance. Sponsored by the Stop Community Food Centre. http://dothemath.thestop.org/

LET’S START A CONVERSATION ABOUT HEALTH . . . AND NOT TALK ABOUT HEALTH CARE AT ALL.
A video from the Sudbury and District Public Health Department about social determinants of health
http://www.sdhu.com/content/healthy_living/doc.asp?folder=3225&parent=3225&lang=0&doc=11749#video

THE COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE PROJECT
This is a video about health inequality as well as the hope and power in community for change. http://www.communityknowledgeproject.org/page2/page2.html