

Community power: Deconstructing the concept and understanding evaluation approaches

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PREPARED FOR:



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

PREPARED BY:

Institute for Community Health

350 Main Street

Malden, MA 02148

www.icommunityhealth.org

TEAM:

Ranjani Paradise, PhD

Amanda Robinson, PhD

Pallavi Goel, BS

Wendy Ji, MPH

Carrie Fisher, PhD

ICH is a nonprofit consulting organization that provides participatory evaluation, applied research, assessment, planning, and technical assistance. ICH helps community-based organizations, health advocacy organizations, foundations, and health care institutions improve their services and maximize program impact

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BACKGROUND AND GOALS

Our organization, the Institute for Community Health (ICH), was contracted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) as the evaluators for the Voices for Health Justice (Voices) program. Voices provides funding and other support to organizations committed to health justice, racial justice, and anti-racism to build power in historically marginalized communities that experience health disparities. The overarching goals of the program are to increase access to health care, make health care more affordable, and increase the ability of the health care system to treat all people with dignity. RWJF is supporting Community Catalyst, Community Change, and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (together called “The Hub”) to fund 25 projects across 24 states to work on community power building for health justice in their areas. Representatives from these three organizations make up a Steering Committee that provides overall program oversight, and these three organizations are also the core technical assistance providers for the grantees.

From April-July 2021, ICH was involved in an evaluation planning period, working collaboratively with the Steering Committee and representatives of the state projects to develop a theory of change and evaluation plan. As part of this work, we conducted a landscape scan, consisting of a literature review and a series of expert interviews. The goal of this landscape scan was to inform the evaluation design by 1) deconstructing the concept of community power and understanding its important characteristics, components, and manifestations to identify focus areas for the evaluation, and 2) increasing our understanding of existing approaches for evaluating community power and power-building programs and the associated benefits and challenges.

This paper summarizes the findings of the landscape scan. Following a brief discussion of our methodology are our learnings on how scholars and practitioners in the field conceptualize community power and its components. Presented next are four case examples that illustrate different aspects of successful power-building initiatives and their consequent outcomes. The second half of the report focuses on our learnings about how to approach evaluating programs designed to build and use community power and the challenges we should be prepared to address in evaluating this type of work.

METHODS

Literature review

We began with a review of literature identified by ICH staff as relevant based on our prior work in the area of community power [19, 36, 46], as well as publications from Lead Local [27, 44, 48, 49], an RWJF-funded project that supported research on community power-building. These articles were used to identify key terminology and experts in the field. We then identified additional resources using a snowball strategy, drawing from the bibliographies of the initial articles we reviewed and publications by experts identified in the literature.

In addition to the snowball search, we conducted keyword searches on Google Scholar and the catalogues of the peer-reviewed journals *New Directions for Evaluation* and *Evaluation and Program Planning*. The key search terms were “community power,” “community involvement,” “community engagement,” and “community capacity,” often used in conjunction with “measuring” or “evaluating.” In addition to theoretical papers on community power and power-building frameworks for measurement, we also specifically searched for studies involving research and evaluation of power-building projects. A second literature search was performed to find publications specifically focused on community power as applied to health advocacy and health policy change. Throughout the literature review, sources published in the last ten years were prioritized, with exceptions for those that were deemed particularly relevant to Voices. This literature search identified 37 studies and 17 frameworks. We conducted a thematic analysis of the literature, the results of which are shared in this document.

Expert interviews

In addition to the literature review, we conducted expert interviews with individuals who had significant experience working in areas of relevance to Voices. Participants included prominent scholars, evaluators, and practitioners who had worked with grassroots community organizations and power-building programs. We identified an initial group of potential interviewees through the literature review and through suggestions from RWJF and the Voices Steering Committee. We then did snowball sampling, requesting additional recommendations from interviewees. In total, we spoke with nine individuals, summarized in the following table.

Participant	Title	Organization
Gigi Barsoum	Principal	Barsoum Policy Consulting
Jane Booth-Tobin	Director	The P ³ Lab at Johns Hopkins University
Seth Borgos	Director of Research and Program Development	Community Change
Lili Farhang	Co-Director	Human Impact Partners
Katie Fox	Principal Associate	Innovation Network
Jennifer Ito	Research Director	USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity
Edwin Lindo	Assistant Dean and Assistant Professor	University of Washington School of Medicine
Andi Mullin	Director of State and Local Technical Assistance	Community Catalyst
Paul Speer	Professor and Chair, Department of Human and Organizational Development	Vanderbilt University

Drawing on initial learnings from the literature review, we identified several areas of inquiry for the interviews, including: participants’ understanding of community power; methodologies for measuring community power and power-building, both on a local and overarching program level; contextual factors that should be considered; challenges we may encounter in this work; and how to consider contribution and/or attribution of program activities to policy changes or other outcomes. We conducted semi-structured interviews, using these areas as the basis for open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes. Our findings from the interviews and the literature review are summarized in the following sections.

FINDINGS – CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY POWER AND ITS COMPONENTS

Understanding how power in general and community power in particular are conceptualized is central to our evaluation work with Voices. This first section of our findings brings together the understandings and definitions of power and community power that we encountered during our landscape scan.

Power is dynamic and context-dependent

One overarching theme from the expert interviews was that power is heavily dependent on context. An individual who possesses power in one setting may possess little power in another setting. An interviewee gave an example of how they have a high level of power in their management role at their workplace, in that they make strategic decisions, control resources, and other staff members engage with them in a certain way. However, they noted how they do not have this same power in other places, such as at the airport. The idea of the nature of power being dependent on context is supported in the literature by Hahrie Han, who says, “Power is inherently a dynamic attribute of relationships between individuals, organizations, and institutions. It is not a static trait; instead, the same individual can be powerful in one context but not powerful in another. Thus, understanding power is inherently contextual and based in place” [27, p. 3].

Defining community power

The Voices project is “rooted in building the power of communities to improve access and affordability and treatment by the health care system through ongoing participation, visibility, and leadership from affected individuals.”¹ As such, *community power* was one of the primary concepts we wanted to explore in this landscape scan. The literature review revealed that the most common definition used in recent publications comes from the Lead Local project report, which states that community power is “the ability of communities most impacted by structural inequity to develop, sustain and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision makers that change systems and advance health equity” [44]. Since the Lead Local report was released, many experts in the field have adopted this definition of community power in their publications [27, 32, 39, 48, 49].

Another common definition was put forth by Goodman et al. in 1998 and describes community power as “the ability to create or resist change regarding community turf, interests, or experiences”; “power with others, not control over them (non-zero-sum-win or

¹ From the Letter of Interest background document

win-win strategies)”; and the ability to “influence across a variety of domains or community contexts” [25, p. 262]. Goodman’s definition was widely accepted by many experts in the field prior to the popularization of the Lead Local definition [16, 22, 23]. Both Lead Local and Goodman emphasize that power needs to come from within and be shared throughout a community to lead to sustainable change that benefits that community. They also both emphasize the importance of power being built in a way such that it can be effective in future organizing or advocacy efforts.

In expert interviews, we asked participants to share what community power means to them. Participants’ responses largely aligned with Lead Local’s definition of community power but also offered additional nuances. There was agreement that community power is the ability of a group of people who are impacted by a problem or issue to work together to find solutions and to have influence on the decision-making processes that affect their lives. What makes a community in this context was more unclear, with interviewees referring to “coalitions,” “an organized set of people,” or those involved in “social movements.” Interviewees indicated that the specific ways in which groups of people connect to each other to organize or engage with advocacy or other change strategies is an area of ongoing exploration and learning. Additionally, in general, scholars who came from an organizing background had a slightly different perspective than those who came from an advocacy background regarding how community power comes into being. Those from an organizing background tended to believe that power is created within a community and can exist as such, while those from an advocacy background tended to believe that power comes from successful efforts to create external changes, such as policy or narrative changes. This distinction is discussed more below in the section on “Applying power towards advocacy.”

Important elements of community power and power-building

While there was some overall consensus in the expert interviews about what it means to have community power, there were a variety of perspectives on the necessary component elements of community power and power-building efforts. However, some themes did emerge, which we summarize here.

Having a base

First, to have community power, there needs to be an independent base of people who are not beholden to funders or powerbrokers. Several sources in our literature review also supported this point, emphasizing that the base should be composed mainly of members of the affected community; have a desire, or, more crucially, a need to make change for themselves or for their community; and be ready to take action to bring about change [studies: 1, 4, 5, 7, 11, 16, 19-24, 29, 30, 34, 35, 36, 39, 43-45, 47, 48; frameworks: 8, 9, 25, 53].

Leaders and leadership development

Next, having leaders for the base is essential for community power, as identified by interview participants and in 18 of the studies and 12 of the frameworks we reviewed [studies: 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 16, 22, 23, 33-36, 38-40, 43, 44, 52; frameworks: 8-10, 14, 17, 25, 27, 28, 32, 37, 48, 49]. Leaders are necessary for organizing and directing the community in finding solutions. Leaders ideally come from the affected community so that they have firsthand experience with the issues at hand [36]. They lead the base in developing goals and working towards goal achievement. For example, if the goal is to further build the base, leaders may organize actions such as door-to-door outreach, phone calls, or emails, and they will do the actions by themselves or recruit others to help. If the goal is to educate community members on why they should join a cause, leaders might hold workshops, distribute online resources on a website or social media page, or hand out flyers. If leaders are trying to organize a rally, they may get the word out to the base about where the rally is and what to do when attending [8, 48]. Expert interview participants described how leaders are responsible for activities like meeting with decision-makers or speaking at rallies, and eventually may gain positions on councils and boards to represent the community's needs.

The necessity of having strong leaders also means that leadership development is an essential part of community power-building. Interview participants and articles in the literature highlighted that successful leadership training and development is connected to the growth of the base. Effective leaders help organize and lead the base to accomplish their collective goals, and those demonstrations of success can attract more support. Additionally, if leaders are trained in recruitment, they can apply these skills directly to gain additional people to join the base [22]. As such, leadership development efforts facilitate the long-term sustainability of community power.

Relationships

Another theme from our expert interviews was the importance of relationships to having and building community power. Meaningful relationships serve as the glue that holds communities together. Without this glue, the community has no connection that pulls them together to form a base for activism. As described by one interviewee, relationships are what keep people on the phone, what makes people want to attend repeat events, and what holds them accountable. Another interviewee drew a distinction between transactional and transformational relationships and noted that transformational relationships are foundational for community power. Transactional relationships involve only an exchange of resources or information while transformational relationships are stronger and more deeply beneficial to all parties involved. An interviewee gave an example of transformational relationships developed during a campaign to get progressive District Attorney candidates elected. The community was engaged by organizing groups throughout the process, and did not feel they were seen only as a source of votes, leading to strong, transformational relationships being built between organizing groups and the community. This meant that,

even after the candidates won their elections, the community stayed engaged, helped inform the policy agenda, and continued to work with the organizing groups. If this had been a purely transactional relationship, there would not have been meaningful ongoing relationships and the community's involvement would likely have ended after the election.

The importance of relationships was supported by 23 of the studies and 13 of the frameworks in the literature review [studies: 1, 3, 4, 7, 12, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 30, 33-36, 38, 39, 43, 44, 46, 47, 52; frameworks: 6, 9, 10, 14, 17, 25, 27, 28, 32, 37, 48-50]. Some articles discussed the importance of building relationships between community members or among members of a single organization [7, 30, 35], and others discussed the importance of relationship-building between organizations, which allows for coalition development [4, 16, 38]. Finally, other studies revealed that relationship-building between community organizations or members and decision-makers is essential for decision-makers to be in touch with and therefore understand the motivations, wants, and needs of the community [19, 39, 52]. Effective relationship-building has the potential to not only create and strengthen communities, but also to mobilize communities to advocate and fight for themselves.

Applying power towards advocacy

Expert interviewees agreed that organizing is the foundation of community power. However, there were some differing opinions around the necessity of applying power through advocacy. Some experts expressed that community power in itself has value, regardless of whether it is applied towards specific goals through advocacy or other efforts. In the literature, Han supports this point, arguing that building community power “is a valued outcome in its own right because it builds individual and collective capacities within a community that are inherently worthwhile” [27, p. 4]. In contrast, others we spoke with felt that power needs to be applied through advocacy in order for it to be meaningful and fully come into being. Bringing together both perspectives suggests that community power is significant because of the kind of change it can lead to within a community as well as the changes that it can lead to in policy or other conditions that affect people's lives.

Regardless of what position experts took regarding the necessity of advocacy, they agreed that when considering advocacy efforts, narrative and communication strategies are useful for elevating issues and presenting them in a way that policymakers and the public not only understand, but also take as inspiration for action. Thus, the ability to influence decision-makers through communication can be conceptualized as an element of community power that becomes important when power is applied to advocacy. Fifteen studies and eight frameworks from the literature review emphasized strategic communications, highlighting the importance of defining target audiences and tailoring communications accordingly [studies: 1, 2, 4, 15, 16, 18, 23, 26, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 45, 46, 54; frameworks: 6, 9, 14, 28, 31, 48, 49, 51].

COMMUNITY POWER IN ACTION

The following case studies give more insight into how these components of community power play out in practice. These examples came out of expert interviews as well as our literature review.

Building a base

One interview participant shared an example of a community bicycling organization they run. They described it as a group of now over 80 riders that has built camaraderie and promoted healing within the BIPOC community through coming together twice a week to cycle. Through the simple act of gathering, they are now “the largest BIPOC cycling club on the West Coast.” The participant described how “people’s lives have been saved, people’s diabetes have gone away because of cycling” with the group. “People no longer have to go to their doctor to get prescriptions for mental health issues because now they’ve gone to seek mental health professional help because of the community” that was built. The participant described this as “the organic element of community power” and added, “I would call that community power because we didn’t have to go ask and beg for it...We showed the strength of the community.” The participant used this example to demonstrate the power of base-building and how it amplified power in his community. Once power was built, the organization attracted the attention of city officials who reached out to the group to find out how cycling can be made safer for people of color. The participant made a distinction between organizing to build community power and advocacy work. They used this as an example of how the community was able to develop their agency and create a situation where those in decision-making roles reached out to the group rather than one where the community had to reach out for help.

Leadership

The importance of leadership development is shown through the LAAMPP Institute’s (Leadership and Advocacy Institute to Advance Minnesota’s Parity for Priority Populations) work in Minnesota [36]. Many marginalized populations in the state are those most affected by tobacco use. The LAAMPP Institute aimed to develop leadership skills of people from these marginalized populations to give them the skill sets to tackle the issue of tobacco use in their own communities. LAAMPP formed and trained six community-based teams (African and African American, Asian-American, American Indian, Latinx, and LGBTQ Fellows Teams) in “capacity building, leadership development, facilitation, collaboration, cultural/community competency, and advocacy” [36, p. 19].

Using the leadership skills they built through the LAAMPP Institute’s trainings, the African and African American Fellows Team initiated and led efforts to educate Ramsey County commissioners on the effects of tobacco use in youth as well as the vulnerability of foster

children to tobacco use. Through this work, the Team was able to pass an ordinance in Ramsey County, MN that banned smoking in foster care homes. This ordinance put pressure on other counties and the state to pass something similar, eventually leading to the state legislature passing a statewide ban.

Even after their time at LAAMPP had ended, the Fellows who participated retained their leadership skill sets for similar work in the future. Years after attending LAAMPP, some Fellows successfully organized community members and lobbied the governor of MN to pass a tobacco tax by arguing that it would ultimately benefit their communities to not be able to access tobacco as easily.

Communication power

The #Health4All campaign during the 2010s provides an example of the power of strategic communication [45]. #Health4All was a movement to expand state-financed health insurance to undocumented immigrants living in California. Grassroots groups and advocates lobbied elected officials, and took part in “public hearings, rallies, and mobilizations on the state capital and elsewhere” to persuade the state government to support their mission [45, p. 359]. Their efforts led to Governor Jerry Brown signing the bill known as Health4All Kids, in 2015, which allowed low-income undocumented children to be enrolled in California’s Medicaid program, also known as Medi-Cal. Brown also signed SB 10 in 2016, which made undocumented adults and DACA recipients eligible to buy unsubsidized health insurance through the California health insurance marketplace. The momentum of Health4All continued as Governor Gavin Newsome signed #Health4All Young Adults in 2019, which allowed enrollment of eligible undocumented adults up to age 26 into Medi-Cal. The journey for undocumented adults ages 26-65 (Health4All Adults) and 65+ (Health4All Seniors) to be covered is still in progress as of the summer of 2021 [13].

The success of the campaign was facilitated by the strategies that grassroots groups and advocates used to communicate with lawmakers. Advocates understood that some decision-makers might use the argument that undocumented immigrants were not American/Californian citizens and therefore did not deserve health care jointly funded by the federal and state governments. Anticipating this, advocates strategically framed the issue around unequal or lack of access to health care rather than an issue of immigrant rights, knowing that “addressing health concerns may be more palatable to some decision-makers than more direct calls for racial justice, immigrant rights, or LGBTQ rights” [45, p. 359]. Ultimately, using the framing of health care access was successful and yielded many of the results the organizers wanted.

Collaboration and relationship-building

The power of collaboration and relationship-building was demonstrated by the work of the MFierce coalition in an LGBTQ+ sexual health intervention in Michigan [47]. The MFierce

Coalition comprised the University Team made up of “public health researchers and practitioners with expertise in community organizing, community psychology, public health, and adolescent development”; the Youth Advisory Board composed of “eight GBTY² ages 19 to 29 years, from Southeast Michigan who were hired as University employees”; and the Steering Committee, which included “representatives from various sectors that provide sexual health–related services to GBTY (i.e., community-based organizations and city and state health departments)” [47, p. 89S]. These parties had meetings, retreats, conferences, and professional development opportunities within and between groups to develop personal and professional relationships. For the intervention, the MFierce coalition met with other LGBTQ+ youth coalitions and organizations dedicated to general youth sexual health services to develop a Health Access Initiative (HAI), which was “a structural change program for health facilities aimed at improving the quality of and access to sexual health care for GBTY” [47, p. 88S].

Results of the HAI were measured six months after implementation at 10 health clinics. Multiple clinics changed their restroom policies to allow GBTY to use whichever bathroom they felt matched their gender identity. At least half of the clinics made changes to the information on their electronic medical records (EMR) to include preferred names, pronouns, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Finally, several clinics added education materials for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, and referral lists for gay and bisexual young men as well as transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. These results show the effectiveness of coalition-building in building community power to carry out a small health intervention, and larger-scale efforts can be modeled upon this work.

² GBTY: gay, bisexual and transgender youth

FINDINGS – EVALUATING COMMUNITY POWER

Based on the data we collected and the literature we reviewed, it is clear that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to measuring community power. Just as the definition of community power is multidimensional, evaluation of community power and power-building programs must also be multifaceted and nuanced. Experts identified some areas of importance to focus on with evaluation and gave suggestions for relevant evaluation methods. This section reviews expert input on evaluation of community power in general, as well as specific considerations they shared for evaluating a program with the structure and complexity of Voices.

What evaluation should look at

All experts we interviewed agreed that measuring community power *and* the change that can result from utilizing this power is important. Additionally, it is not enough to just measure short-term outcomes of exercising power. For example, a community with power may exercise that power to get a progressive politician elected, and it is important to follow up beyond the initial election outcome to understand if and how the desired changes were produced. Did that politician have the ability or opportunity to change policy in the way that the community group that supported them desired?

In addition to these broad suggestions about being attentive to the outcomes that result from utilizing built power, there were a number of specific areas that experts suggested were worth exploring in an evaluation of a community power-building program. These suggestions are organized into three categories: 1) those related to intra-organizational capacity and infrastructure (what is happening within an organization), 2) those related to organizational networks (relationships among coalition partners, the funder, and other organizations in the power ecosystem), and 3) those related to the external context (conditions outside of organizations that influence programs and their outcomes).

Intra-organizational capacity and infrastructure

Expert interview participants highlighted three main areas of focus for evaluation at the intra-organizational level. First, experts noted that individual organizations have unique capacities and capabilities, and an understanding of those capacities (personnel, time, skills and experience, etc.), is important to incorporate into any evaluation examining community power-building. Secondly, it is important to assess unique characteristics of each organization's base, including the level of engagement of that base in the project or issue at hand. The importance of understanding the base is also emphasized in the literature we reviewed - for example, factors such as native language, stigma around seeking health care, lack of trust in the institution of medicine/health care, and social determinants of health should all be taken into account when thinking about differences among the bases that

various organizations have and are seeking to build [1, 12]. Finally, the third area of focus recommended by expert interviewees was organizations' capacity for and approach to evaluation. How organizations conceptualize community power and its outcomes, whether or not they are using a theory of change, and what data they are already collecting should all be taken into account when developing an approach to evaluating the work organizations are doing.

Organizational networks

For a project like Voices, where 25 different state-level programs are working in multi-organization coalitions towards the same goal of building community power to improve health justice, understanding the organizational networks and partnerships relevant to the projects is critical. Expert interviewees shared what they saw as some of the important areas to consider for a project of this scope and structure.

As there are so many players in this project, experts noted that it is important to understand the power dynamics and relationships that might have the potential to influence program outcomes, including various parties' previous experiences working together before Voices (or lack thereof). This includes the relationships among grantees and subgrantees and the group dynamics that arise within each state-based project, as well as the relationships between the grantees and the organizations in the Hub. Finally, the relationship between the funder and the funded parties is important to consider, as the RWJF's history, reputation, and definition of success can influence the way the program is carried out.

External context

Experts noted that the broader environment in which the funded organizations are operating will also influence how the project will work, and shared suggestions about what contextual factors to include in an evaluation of community power. First, experts emphasized that demographics, history, and politics can all influence how successful individual organizations are. Specifically, experts suggested assessing factors such as population size and characteristics, median household income, racism, political leanings and leadership, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature supports this, with Wallerstein et al. [52] advocating for the importance of considering "historical, structural, racial, and economic inequities" (p. 28S) and Pastor, Ito, and Wander [44] advising consideration of how external ecosystems can lead to social inequities and start social movements. Broader national trends also trickle down into the states and to the local level in a way that can impact the success of a project. Many experts emphasized the use of narrative power in building community power, which relates to this point, as changing the national narrative in a way that supports the goals of the grantees can further their impact.

Methods for evaluation

In addition to the insight the expert interviewees shared on how to approach evaluating community power building in terms of concepts and focus, they also offered their advice on data collection techniques and the process of collecting input from organizations.

Engaging communities

Experts advised that it is important for researchers to remember that communities are more likely to invest in research when 1) meaningful relationships are built between the community and researchers and 2) the community can see a clear benefit to this research. In addition, the experts we interviewed agreed that it is important to think about how researchers can minimize community burden when collecting data. Leveraging and building off of existing evaluation activities and data sources is one strategy for minimizing burden. Pastor, Ito, and Wander [44] used this approach with their Lead Local research and found it to be successful, focusing their work on organizations that were already engaged in the areas the research was examining. As another strategy for managing burden, one expert brought up the bite-snack-meal approach for data collection, where grantees can participate in the evaluation as much as they are interested in participating. Some may only want a “bite” of evaluation and will participate no more than the grant requires them to do. Some may want a “snack” and a bit more involvement. And others may want a full “meal” and to be actively engaged in the evaluation process from start to finish. As evaluators, it is our responsibility to assess how much communities want to engage and respond accordingly to find the right balance.

Quantitative and qualitative data collection

According to our interviewees, quantitative data can be particularly useful for evaluating community engagement and base-building. Engagement can be illustrated through the numbers of people reached, people added to organization databases, emails sent, people at rallies, and phone calls made. Speer, Gupta, and Haapanen [49] created an extensive list of base-building actions that can be measured and used as quantitative data for future community power and power-building studies. Looking at the data collection methodologies in the literature, many studies used surveys to collect information about base-building and community engagement.

However, not everything has to be, can be, or should be quantified. Across the interviews, experts emphasized the importance of collecting qualitative data from the community, which can yield insight into many of the components of community power and power-building discussed earlier in this report. Qualitative approaches identified by experts as effective for this type of work included interviews with community-facing organization staff, observations, case studies into individual projects and the frameworks they rely on, and analysis of narrative change over time with particular focus on if community-created local media is picked up state-wide or nationally. In terms of qualitative data collection methods found in

the literature, common methods included interviews, focus groups, site visits, and incorporation of secondary data to make sense of findings. Through qualitative measurements, evaluators can understand programs in depth and with nuance, incorporate the knowledge and perspectives of community members, and bring life to the numbers.

Evaluating policy change

Finally, some experts expressed hesitation on whether policy change should be the gold standard for the outcome of community power-building. One expert noted that policy change can take a long time and that community power can create positive outcomes in other ways. Another interviewee discussed how communities have come together to successfully change the public narrative, such as how Occupy Wall Street has impacted conversations around wealth, demonstrating communication power even without policy change. Thus, evaluation should not base success solely on whether or not policy change has occurred, but rather needs to take a holistic view of the various ways in which power can be built and can manifest.

Challenges

Experts shared that the evaluation of an advocacy-focused program as multifaceted and large as Voices for Health Justice should expect to face a variety of challenges. The challenges that could arise include some related to how the program is structured and some that are outside of the program design. It is important to understand and plan for these challenges as we shape and implement our evaluation.

Challenges related to the program structure

Several interviewees raised potential challenges around how the Voices program is structured. First, experts mentioned that it may be challenging to keep the big picture goals at the forefront when working on this project that has components on the local, state, and national levels. Also, evaluation challenges could stem from differences in how individual organizations or stakeholders define power and understand their own theories of change in relation to the overall Voices goals. In addition, interviewees drew attention to the fact that building power and making change in the way this program aims to do is a long-term process. They questioned whether the sub-2.5-year project length is enough time to not only build and leverage power, but to also see results in health care access, affordability, or dignity. Understanding realistic timeframes for achieving outcomes is critical for informing what we can reasonably expect to measure with the evaluation and will help us focus resources and define success appropriately.

Challenges outside of the program structure

Experts also reflected on factors outside of the program structure that may create challenges for our evaluative work. Identifying indicators of change was a major challenge mentioned, as tensions exist over what the best measures for power-building are and which

ones are the most valid. One expert noted that some things may be easy to measure but not meaningful, while others may be meaningful but not easy to measure. Understanding the contribution of project activities to outcomes is another area that will be challenging, as some victories may be directly linked to project work, while others may be due to confounding factors such as outside advocacy efforts. Han [27] discusses additional challenges of measurement, arguing that power is multidimensional and therefore may be hard to measure because of the many ways that it can manifest itself. Therefore, in designing measurement strategies it is important to take into account different forms of power. These include visible indicators of power, such as policy wins, elected candidates, or an engaged base; agenda-setting power, which is the ability to influence the base and/or decision makers to follow a specific course of action; and narrative power, the ability to influence the public narrative regarding the pertinent issue. Additionally, Han argues that a linear relationship between activities, outcomes, and impacts cannot be assumed; therefore, evaluations must consider and account for complexities such as feedback loops and real-time modifications of activities in response to observed outcomes.

Another challenge inherent to any project with multiple stakeholders is the time it takes to build relationships and trust. Expert interviewees noted that as we proceed, we must be attentive to relationship- and trust-building in order to facilitate stakeholder engagement in the evaluation. They also highlighted that there may be some limitations to the level of trust we can build when relying on virtual interactions over a relatively short time frame, and that our evaluation approaches and requests to program stakeholders should account for this.

Overall, in reflecting on potential challenges, the expert interview participants acknowledged the complexities of this project and focused their feedback on highlighting areas where we should take care, think through potential difficulties, and build our evaluation plan with these concerns in mind, rather than on providing solutions to the anticipated problems. There was not consensus among those interviewed on how we should best proceed, but it was clear that being flexible and responsive to situations as they arise will be crucial.

INCORPORATING FINDINGS INTO THE VOICES EVALUATION

Through this landscape scan, we identified key elements and characteristics of community power and power-building initiatives. We also gathered recommendations for evaluation focus areas and methods, as well as input on potential challenges that we may encounter in evaluating a program like Voices. We have used the findings from this landscape scan to inform the development of our theory of change model and evaluation plan for the Voices project (see Attachments: Theory of change model and Evaluation plan).

First, based on the literature review and our conversation with Gigi Barsoum, we selected the Barsoum power-building framework [9] with the addition of the Conditions for Change element of the Changing States framework [42] as our overarching guiding framework for understanding community power-building for the Voices program. Next, after developing a draft of the theory of change model based on the input and expertise of program stakeholders (grantees, subgrantees, and Steering Committee members), we reviewed the theory of change against our findings from this landscape scan. We identified strong alignment, with base-building, leadership development, relationship-building, and narrative/communication strategies all included in the theory as articulated by Voices stakeholders. Based on stakeholder input as well as the findings from the landscape scan, we included increased community power as a long-term outcome in its own right, as well as outcomes related to applying power through advocacy for the purposes of policy and other systems change. Drawing from the input of expert interviewees and the literature, we also emphasized the importance of context in the theory of change and illustrated the dynamic nature of power through feedback loops.

We have also integrated the findings from the landscape scan into our Voices evaluation plan. Here, we aligned areas of inquiry that were priorities for program stakeholders with the areas highlighted by expert interview participants and in the literature, taking care to incorporate a multidimensional exploration of community power to account for the different ways it may manifest across projects and settings. Our areas of inquiry will include base-building, leadership development, relationship-building, organizational capacity-building, communications and narrative change, advocacy, and policy outcomes. The evaluation also has a central focus on power ecosystems and inter-organizational relationships and collaborations, and we will be integrating contextual factors into our analysis and interpretation of findings across all areas of inquiry. We recognize that the short timescale of the program may limit what can realistically be achieved, as highlighted by expert interviewees, and our aim is to build a nuanced understanding about what kinds of structures and supports work best to build community power for health justice in different settings, rather than evaluating against a predetermined definition of success.

Our evaluation planning process has been highly participatory, engaging grantees and subgrantees in a collaborative design process to build relationships and create an evaluation that will bring value to stakeholders while minimizing burden, as advised by experts we interviewed. As interviewees noted, there are multiple perspectives on what community power means and what is important to measure, and our participatory process has helped us understand this and develop a theory of change and evaluation plan that are comprehensive and inclusive of these varied perspectives. The ongoing evaluation will continue to use participatory approaches to engage grantees, subgrantees, and other stakeholders throughout the process, keeping relationship- and trust-building as priorities throughout.

Our data collection strategy is also aligned with the recommendations that came out of this landscape scan. We will use mixed methods for the Voices evaluation, selecting quantitative and/or qualitative approaches based on the methods that are best suited to each area of inquiry. In addition, we have designed the evaluation to strategically leverage data that is already being collected by the Hub to minimize what we ask of grantees and subgrantees. Given the scale of the Voices program, our evaluation will include a combination of “light touch” data collection across all funded projects with “deep dives” into a selected set of projects, thus offering different levels of participation options. Grantees and subgrantees will also receive compensation commensurate with their level of participation in the evaluation process. Finally, our evaluation will not seek to demonstrate direct attribution of Voices activities to outcomes but will rather seek to identify places where Voices activities have made a contribution to the observed outcomes and impacts.

Overall, this landscape scan was highly valuable for deepening our conceptual understanding of community power and power-building programs, and for helping us develop a Voices theory of change and evaluation plan that are aligned with current knowledge. As we proceed with the Voices evaluation, we hope that our methods and findings further advance this knowledge and will be of use to funders, scholars, and practitioners working in the power-building field.

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