Amplifying Voices through Community-led Data Collection

What is Community-led Data Collection?

Evaluators, consultants, and researchers commonly lead and execute all aspects of data collection in support of an assessment or evaluation. Even when these teams include staff or students from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, they may be limited in the scope or depth of primary data they can collect across communities and languages because of resource, time, local knowledge, and other constraints. Evaluators can overcome these barriers through community-led data collection – a process of engaging members of communities where data collection is taking place as partners, facilitators, and stakeholders. Community members bring unique skillsets, ties to local organizations, and authenticity that can help bring to the fore voices that are often missed in evaluation and assessment activities. In addition, engaging community members early and often can help build buy-in both for the assessment process itself and for the resulting report, recommendations, and strategies as communities see themselves represented as core contributors to the research.

How Can Evaluators Support Community-led Data Collection?

Evaluators can support clients interested in engaging community partners in data collection by providing training and logistical support. Volunteer facilitators will often have deep knowledge of their community institutions and dynamics, but need ongoing technical support to successfully conduct focus groups. Evaluators can provide formal training sessions, as well as more informal “on-call” support for facilitators.

In addition, evaluators and clients can share the logistical burden of coordinating data collection, especially for large-scale efforts. If clients have existing relationships with community organizations who can provide facilitators, as well as space to host groups, their direct communication with these partners can encourage engagement. Evaluators can provide support by developing and translating focus group guides, coordinating communication with facilitators around day-of planning, and handling pre-analysis tasks such as transcription and translation of focus group recordings.

Challenges of Community-led Data Collection

- **Ensuring consistent and neutral facilitation** – using multiple facilitators and focus group guides translated into different languages introduces significant variation across groups that may limit generalizability of results. In addition, community partners may have a more difficult time than trained facilitators remaining neutral during groups.
- **Providing sufficient training for facilitators to be confident probing and reframing** – skilled facilitators will probe for more information, ask follow-up questions, and shift groups back on track if conversations veer too far off topic. These skills take practice, and community facilitators may struggle picking them up.
- **Logistics, coordination, and expense** – even if responsibility for coordination is diffuse, large-scale data collection efforts require significant time and resources, especially if focus groups will be recorded, transcribed, and translated.

Benefits of Community-led Data Collection

- **Participants provide more in-depth information to facilitators they relate to –** especially when discussing difficult or sensitive topics, focus group participants may be more comfortable and open with facilitators who reflect their background and community.
- **Community members and institutions strengthen communication and trust –** community members appreciate the opportunity to share their experiences and have institutions hear their voices. Data collection efforts can build new communication channels and a foundation for future engagement.
- **Community organizations build capacity** – training facilitators at community agencies builds those organizations skillsets and capacity to participate or lead future efforts.

Key Considerations

Keep focus group guides simple – while this is a best practice for all focus groups, it is especially important for those run by less experienced facilitators and translation.

Leverage existing network of community partners – if possible, maximize institutions' ongoing relationships with agencies and organizations to recruit facilitators, while carefully considering whether this network is representative of the community.

Continuously engage facilitators for additional feedback and meaning-making – to help build facilitator capacity and ensure quality data collection, set aside time to review focus group recordings or transcripts and provide feedback to facilitators. In addition, evaluators can benefit from re-engaging facilitators during analysis to help make meaning of and provide additional context for the data collected.

Facilitation Tips and Reminders

Community Facilitated Focus Groups

Before the focus group begins

In the days before the group

- Review the protocol ahead of time, paying close attention to the questions in **bold**; make sure you bring your copy of the protocol to the focus groups
- Review the "Facilitation Techniques" handout to get tips on keeping the focus group discussion on track
- Confirm location, date, and time of the focus group

At the focus group location

- Arrive 30 minutes before the group is scheduled to begin so you have time to set up and get ready, including setting up the digital recorder

Minding the digital recorder

- Get the digital recorder from the evaluation team and ask participants' permission to record as part of your discussion of ground rules
    - If any person refuses to be recorded, you cannot use the digital recorder
    - If someone enters the focus group late, make sure that you receive their consent to record
- During the focus group, state participants' body language out loud (e.g. *"I see many of you nodding"* or *"It looks like five of you have raised your hands"*) so that it is captured on the recording

Role of the facilitator

- Guide and keep the discussion on track
- Encourage participation and open conversation
- Be non-judgmental and do not influence answers
- Establish rapport and make participants feel relaxed
- Read protocol introductory text (background, ground rules, etc.) and ask protocol questions and probes as written

Facilitation "Do's"

- Pause – resist the temptation to fill silence after asking a question
- Scan the room – move your eyes across participants' foreheads to invite participation non-verbally
- Probe – be sure you really understand what is being said by asking for more information through questions like *"Would you explain further?"* or *"Could you say more about that?"*

Facilitation "Don'ts"

- Arrive at the focus group unprepared
- Express your views or opinions
- Agree or disagree with participants
- Influence conversation through your actions:
    - o Saying things like *"right"* or *"excellent"*
    - o Nodding or shaking your head in response to what is said

After the focus group

- Thank participants for attending
- Work with note-taker to distribute demographic surveys and collect when completed

Note-taker Tips and Reminders

Community Facilitated Focus Groups

Before the focus group begins

In the days before the group

- Review the protocol ahead of time, paying close attention to the questions in **bold**; make sure you bring your copy of the protocol to the focus groups
- Confirm location, date, and time of the focus group

At the focus group location

- Arrive 30 minutes before the group is scheduled to begin so you have time to set up and get ready
- Have a computer or paper/pens ready
    - Make sure to either have a hard copy or electronic copy of the protocol next to you
    - If you are typing, type your notes directly on the protocol

Purpose of the notes

- Use instead of the audio recording if the participants do not want to be recorded, or if the recording is low quality
- Capture non-verbal cues that the recording may not capture
- Track the number of participants
- Provide quotes that can be used in the final report

In your notes

- Note the date, location, and language of focus group on the top
- Note number of participants; assigning a number or letter to each participant helps keep track of who is speaking and is considered a best practice
    - Use the assigned number or letter throughout your notes to make sure that individual voices are identified clearly and that quotes are represented accurately
    - You may want to sketch a seating assignment to help remember participants

Taking notes

- Use participants' words as close to verbatim as possible (except for fillers like "um," "uh," etc.) – unless participants are struggling to respond
- Do not summarize what people are saying, instead write down their words as exactly as possible
- Speak up if a response is unclear to you
- Note major non-verbal cues (heads nodding or shaking, etc.) in parenthesis or asterisks
- Note if participants leave the focus group early or arrive late

Role of note-taker

- Work with facilitator to keep group on track
- Maintain neutrality in appearance and demeanor – do not agree or disagree with what participants are saying
- Distribute the demographic survey and collect it back at the end of the group
- Pay attention to the audio recorder

After the focus group

- Give completed demographic surveys back to the evaluation team
- Type and clean-up notes to send to the evaluation team – if taking notes in a language other than English, please translate your notes and send both versions to the team
- Write down key themes from the group and send them with your notes to the evaluation team