Engaging Communities as Research Collaborators

This tool is part of Mathematica's suite of measurement and evaluation (M&E) tools, which provides a road map for generating timely and actionable evidence about what works for whom, and in what context. The tools were designed to promote rapid innovation and scaling of promising solutions (such as programs, practices, or products). The Engaging Communities as Research Collaborators tool is used in Step 1 through Step 4 of the M&E process.

STEP 1 Assess **STEP 2** Plan **STEP 3** Conduct **STEP 4** Analyze & Report

Learn more about the M&E process and other tools here:
https://www.mathematica.org/features/advancing-educational-equity

Who should use this guide to engaging communities as research collaborators?

This tool is designed for organizations planning to measure the implementation or outcomes of their programs, products, or practices. The tool could be used by the organization's program leads or other staff, or by an external research partner, technical assistance provider, or consultant.

What is this guide to engaging communities as research collaborators?

This tool offers strategies for engaging community members as part of a research team and including their experiences, perspectives, and expertise throughout the research process. It outlines principles for including community members as co-researchers and evaluation advisors and provides practical examples of collaboration strategies to apply in each step of the M&E process. The tips and techniques here can be adapted to fit different evaluation goals and contexts, and teams should continually examine, refine, and expand on these approaches through their collaborations. When teams incorporate community voices into M&E activities, it helps them design research and produce results that are more just, valid, and useful for everyone involved (Schnarch, 2004). This guide is designed to be used with the **Guide to Equitably Co-Interpreting Data with Community Collaborators** and the **Disseminating Results with a Community Focus Tool** to help teams conduct research more equitably.

Engaging Communities as Research Collaborators

Overview

Engaging community members as valued collaborators in M&E activities supports research that aligns to and emphasizes community interests, needs, and values. Research teams that implement collaborative, participatory methods with communities can actively disrupt the status quo that the people and communities being studied often experience (Gonzalez et al., 2022). A conversation about research that does not include community members is a conversation missing key voices, and there is a risk that research will happen "to" communities and not "with" them (Chicago Beyond, 2019; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Without incorporating community voices, organizations are at risk of conducting research that reinforces deficit narratives, biases, or long-standing structural inequities that ultimately harm communities (Gonzalez et al., 2022).

Organizations that are intentional about engaging the community members who are the focus of M&E activities throughout the research process—for example, by engaging participants like students, teachers, administrators, and parents in research conducted in educational settings—produce results that are more just, valid, and useful for all involved (Schnarch, 2004). Building knowledge together surpasses learning that takes place separately (Dean-Coffey et al., 2014). By drawing on the community's strengths throughout the M&E process, teams can design more actionable and responsive research and produce findings that lead to more effective and sustainable programs, policies, and practices and, ultimately, better outcomes for students.

Equitable evaluation resources and frameworks

The following resources on equitable evaluation helped us frame this guide:

- **Using a Culturally Responsible and Equitable Evaluation Approach to Guide Research and Evaluation** (Woodson, 2021)
- **Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014)
- The **Equitable Evaluation Framework™** (Dean-Coffey, 2017)
- **Why Am I Always Being Researched? A Guidebook for Community Organizations, Researchers, and Funders to Help Us Get from Insufficient Understanding to More Authentic Truth** (Chicago Beyond, 2019)

Principles for engaging community members as research collaborators

Community engagement is a process situated in the context of unique communities with diverse needs. As such, elevating the voices and experience of communities in M&E is bound by three key principles (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Woodson, 2021):

- Strong awareness of the context that researchers bring to the evaluation and how that context affects understanding the community being served, as well as a deliberate openness to learning about and challenging assumptions

- Careful efforts to create a mutually beneficial partnership built on trust, shared power, and cultural awareness

- A willingness to collaborate intentionally with communities throughout the M&E process, including being adaptable in supporting community engagement

When beginning M&E activities, researchers and organizations can use the strategies and recommended actions in the following table to navigate their work through these principles. The subsequent section then provides examples of how these collaboration practices might be tailored based on the desired level of partnership from the community.

Community engagement strategy	Recommended actions for researchers and organizations
Understand the context that researchers and communities both bring to the evaluation	
Reflect on personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions	• Consider how the research team's background and experiences inform conscious and unconscious assumptions, biases, and beliefs about the community in focus and the community's need for and interest in the evaluation. • Reflect on assumptions about what is worth researching, what counts as evidence in research, and who can participate in research. • Name what the research team stands to gain from the evaluation and how that may differ from or overlap with what community members stand to gain.
Engage communities early and often in the M&E process	• Early in the process, partner with schools or local organizations to conduct need-sensing and feedback sessions, taking advantage of existing relationships and connections when possible. Be prepared to explain overarching goals clearly and assess how they match (or don't match) with community priorities. • Identify community members such as parents, teachers, administrators, students, local organization staff, and community leaders who can serve as lived experience experts and engage them throughout the M&E process. Lived experience experts are people who have knowledge from first-hand experiences with issues, processes, and systems examined by researchers (Mann et al., 2020). For example, a former or current teacher can speak to the challenges of implementing a new math curriculum. • Invite community members to participate in calls or in-person discussions and to review materials.

Community engagement strategy	Recommended actions for researchers and organizations
Learn about the community, including the varied needs and experiences among its members	• Explore available data, research, news, and other sources to gather information about the community in focus. For example, if the evaluation takes place in a school district, explore the district website or attend school board meetings. • Ask community members to identify their need for and interest in the research. Align research goals to what the community values. • Define key concepts so they align with community members' understanding of them. For example, do schools, teachers, and parents define "college readiness" in the same way as the researchers? • Be cognizant of the variety of experiences within the community and avoid generalizing experiences across groups.

	Build mutually beneficial partnerships on trust, shared power, and cultural awareness
Balance power among those conducting the research	• Discuss group norms for interactions and ensure everyone has an opportunity for input. Pay attention to who typically speaks and who is spoken over to address power imbalances that can harm collaboration. • Ensure community members feel prepared to participate and have access to the same background information as the rest of the research team. Avoid materials that contain jargon or are too technical. • Address barriers that may limit collaboration by providing language supports or other accessibility supports. Periodically check in with community members about their experience on the research team. • Engage multiple voices from the community. For example, if researching a new academic program, seek input not only from administrators but from teachers, students, and families.
Build trust and show value of community members	• Show a sincere interest in engaging community members in key decisions and incorporate their ideas, feedback, and suggestions into the evaluation. • Compensate community members and recognize their contributions appropriately and fairly. Compensation in the form of financial payment or goods acknowledges time and contributions to research efforts. Other methods of recognition might include formal acknowledgements of authorship and contributions within dissemination products.
Pay attention to relevant cultural norms	• Ask community members whether the research design, proposed activities, and instruments are culturally responsive and appropriate. • Use language and terms that are familiar and match how community members describe themselves. • Ask about community practices or preferences the research team should be aware of to uphold cultural norms.

Community engagement strategy	Recommended actions for researchers and organizations
Be respectful of community members and their level of engagement in the M&E process	
Clearly define the "ask" as community members engage in M&E activities	• Identify and clearly define roles and responsibilities throughout all stages of the process by gauging community members' level of interest and desired level of involvement. • Avoid over- or underestimating interest, investment, and availability by openly discussing preferences with community members.
Be flexible and work with communities to identify the right fit for collaboration	• Create a flexible structure for participation that allows community members to balance outside demands while still participating in a meaningful way. • Allow community members to suggest ways they would like to contribute. Listen to suggestions and brainstorm together what approaches to put in place. • Develop a formal plan for how the research team can engage community members throughout the evaluation and at each step of the M&E process. Gather reactions to the plan.

Practices for flexible collaboration that meet community members where they are

Collaboration across researchers and communities increases research validity, effectiveness, and legitimacy (Yale School of Medicine, Equity Research and Innovation Center, n.d.). Communities bring a wealth of practical expertise, knowledge, and ability to evaluations (Mann et al., 2020), so researchers and organizations deeply benefit from working with community members to develop collaboration strategies that align to their skills and desired level of engagement. Having a say in what their collaboration looks like also strengthens community involvement (Rabinowitz, n.d.). Researchers and community members can collaborate across all steps of the M&E process in the following ways:

• Identifying evaluation needs and interests alongside each other

• Co-developing goals and procedures for conducting the evaluation

• Sharing responsibility for conducting the evaluation, collecting data, and monitoring progress

• Co-interpreting data and co-determining how to share findings broadly and inclusively

Example collaboration practices by desired level of partnership from the community

M&E step	High partnership engagement	Medium partnership engagement	Moderate partnership engagement
1. Identify evaluation needs and interests	• Include community members as part of the core research team. For example, select community members could fully participate in ongoing research team meetings. • Create a formal advisory group of lived experience experts.	• Hold regular interactive meetings with the community. For example, meet monthly with teachers at a school to share evaluation plans and progress and to gather thoughts and input.	• Hold information sessions to introduce the evaluation and gather broad input from a large group. • Conduct focus group(s) to solicit direct input on program and evaluation plans.
2. Plan the evaluation	• Co-develop research questions. • Co-develop the study design at the beginning of the evaluation, rather than including community members after already forming a plan.	• Hold regular interactive meetings with the community to discuss the research questions and study design and to revisit evaluation needs. Gather feedback to inform meaningful changes and make the research more relevant or actionable.	• Share the research questions and study design so community members can review on their own. Gather feedback to gauge reactions to and understanding of the purpose, relevance, and fit of the evaluation approach.
3. Conduct the evaluation	• Conduct the evaluation together. For example, empower community members to lead recruitment efforts, coordinate and conduct data collection, or implement the intervention with the research team.	• Provide ways for community members to assist with study support activities on their own. For example, community members could distribute flyers or other information to recruit participants. • Hold interactive meetings with the community to gather input on implementation and share progress updates.	• Share periodic updates on implementation and evaluation progress and gather suggestions for implementation via surveys.

M&E step	High partnership engagement	Medium partnership engagement	Moderate partnership engagement
4. Analyze and report findings	• Jointly analyze and interpret the data with community members during analysis meetings. **Review the Guide to Equitably Co-Interpreting Data with Community Collaborators** for in-depth guidance on collaborative data interpretation. • Share responsibilities for outlining or writing sections of the research report. • Co-develop a dissemination plan and tools and co-present findings. Review the **Disseminating Results with a Community Focus** tool for strategies on embedding community perspective in dissemination activities.	• Hold regular interactive meetings with the community to discuss interpretation and reporting; gather feedback on dissemination strategies. • Create materials for community members to share findings independently. For example, prepare text that community members can use to share findings on social media.	• Share evaluation findings for community members to review on their own and collect feedback on clarity and interpretation of the findings. • Share dissemination strategies through calls, surveys, or other informal methods, focusing on whether the current approach is likely to be successful and seeking additional ways to make findings accessible and relevant.

Note: This table is not an exhaustive list of collaboration practices. Learning from sustained and meaningful interaction with communities is the best approach for developing relevant collaboration strategies.

Ensuring sufficient organizational resources for engaging community members as research collaborators

The promise of engaging community members as collaborators in the research process brings risk of harm to communities when the promise is not realized, creating distrust and continuing long standing trends of inequitable research practices (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Chicago Beyond, 2019). To prevent this harm, researchers and organizations should assess their readiness to realize collaboration goals by carefully reflecting upon whether they have sufficient resources and organizational capacities for the work (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.; Anderson & Mastri, 2019), including:

- Adequate time for planning, training, executing collaborative engagements (including researcher meetings, information sessions and forums, focus groups, and survey administration), and synthesizing community feedback and collaborator input

- Sufficient staffing for planning and support of collaboration activities with community members
- Strong partnerships with local leaders and organizations to reach community members more effectively
- Adequate resources to support engagement and collaboration activities, including funds for compensation, meeting facilitation, or dissemination efforts
- Internal leadership that values and supports sustained efforts to involve community members in research

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