

Questions about community work

Appendix B¹

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In order to produce a strategy for community work at CSVR, it has been found useful to generate a set of questions or areas of interest that should be covered by future descriptions of interventions. These include questions about context, target group, theories of intervention, indicators and resources required. The questions are inspired by the RCT publication, “An exploratory literature review on community interventions in four Latin American countries” (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010).

What is the context of intervention?

To evaluate any intervention it is necessary to understand the context of the intervention, describing the rationale behind the intervention. Why is it necessary to do the intervention? Hence, the posing of the problem is an important part of understanding why a specific intervention was chosen.

Systematic protocols for appraising communities as intervention contexts should be worked towards (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010) but in the interim, fine-grained information about the context of the specific community of intervention should be provided. Rather than macro-political milestones only, local patterns of violence should be included. In addition simple “binary models” to illustrate the nature of violence should be avoided, for example, white police versus young black men, because violence is often generated by a variety of factors and does not always reflect the political change at a macro level. For example, violence of everyday life in post-conflict Latin America mirrors past periods of political conflicts and dictatorships and has not changed with macro political change, such as the end of dictatorships (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010).

In community interventions around violence the context or the reason for intervention often consists of an easily identifiable event - a massacre, a service delivery boycott and demonstrations, outbreaks of xenophobic violence or a forced removal. Each of these events then leads to the creation of an intervention. However, it is not always easy to identify a singular event. For instance, in relation to our specific context, current torture and CIDT in South Africa, as the report “Torture in South Africa” (Dissel, Jensen & Roberts, 2009) illustrates, the events are rather mundane, invisible and often not seen as out of the ordinary even by the victims. In the words of American philosopher Elisabeth Povinelli (2011) they are quasi-events, often obscured by the more easily identifiable events. Hence, the rationale for the intervention must be different and encompass more than simply pointing to events. Whether there is an event or not, it is crucial to describe the context in order to position the interventions within a larger framework.

¹ This paper also serves as an appendix to an unpublished *internal* CSVR paper called “Finding our way: developing a community work model for addressing torture. Version 1, 2011”. In 2012, a condensed version of the paper which incorporated the appendices was made available with the same title on the CSVR and Dignity websites (by Bantjes, M, Langa, M & Jensen, S).

The context of the intervention also refers to constraints or facilitating factors which would shape interventions in particular ways. For example, Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo (2010) note that the Global South equates peace-building efforts with pursuing social justice because of the oppression and asymmetrical distribution of resources which characterise these contexts.

In post-conflict societies, the nature and density of social relationships in families and communities should be described in detail so that they can be assessed pre and post-intervention. In contexts in which structural violence plays a role, clarity is needed as to whether structural violence is being seen as a variable causing specific problems, that is, a stressor or whether it is just an attribute of the context. “Construction of more disaggregated pictures of the reality in which interventions take place” is needed (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010, p. 12).

McLeroy et al. (2003) note that community projects often include a description of the community (context), but they do not consider deeply enough how community factors will impact and should impact on the intervention. They suggest that if systematic research was done on community based interventions to document the variables involved in community change and their relationships to each other, then “a general lack of awareness or strategic use of community factors as levers of change” would be found (p. 532). This suggests that the community context should not just be seen as a static setting for an intervention or a set of potential barriers or constraints to an intervention but should also be seen as presenting opportunities for leveraging desired changes.

Who is the target group?

Although it appears evident that thorough consideration of the target group must be made, Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo (2010) illustrate that project descriptions vary from strong quantitative or qualitative descriptions to the purely anecdotal in the projects they explore. Sometimes the target group is ‘refugees in need of legal assistance’. Such a target group is invariably weak if it is not qualified. Hence, there is a need to establish clear criteria of inclusion and exclusion, considerations of how beneficiaries are reached and the extent to which this actually happens.

For instance, in the current project we have struggled with identifying the target group and accessing it. Different approaches have been attempted, but often without giving due reflection to the efficiency of the approach. The description of the target group will provide the basis for discussing the target group and how it is identified and accessed (called “Strategies of contact” by Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo, 2010, p. 15). Such descriptions, based on informed reflections and literature are necessary for any project. Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo (2010) also suggest that projects should be attuned to the effects of their strategies of contact and be willing to report on faulty decisions or failures so that they can be used to learn from.

Furthermore, most target groups are defined by their needs as victims. For instance, torture victims are in need of rehabilitation. However, there are implicit hierarchies of victimhood where some are considered more worthy victims than others. These claims of victimhood are often based on implicit moral perceptions around race, gender, age and class. The target group in the current project is slightly problematic. A victim of

police harassment in South Africa is seldom just an injured body or soul and they seldom live up to moral standards. Often they will be young poor, black men who have committed crimes, what could be termed victim-perpetrators. When considering who is the most vulnerable and worthy of intervention, there is a constant need to revisit own moral perceptions and stereotypes. Victims are seldom only victims. The various target groups to which one person accessed by the project may belong to should be explored. For example, an ex-detainee may be targeted by a different project as a perpetrator (of a crime) while we are targeting them as a victim of crime (torture/CIDT). The description of the target group which will be used should be evaluated and its effect considered. For example, calling people “victims” may not entice them to join a project in all cases. Also gatekeeping institutions may respond differently depending on their target group names and how they differ or overlap with ours.

In terms of research, clearly defining target groups allows for meta-studies or reviews (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010). Problematic ways of describing target groups include describing them as those that have suffered similar violations because this can promote the assumption that they share psychosocial attributes. Using legal categories such as “internally displaced people” can be more about matching beneficiaries to donor-driven categories and suggest that the group is homogenous when it is not. It is imperative to provide “an exhaustive description of the target population in question” which should include specific aspects such as their socio-economic, health and mental health status (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010, p.17).

What are the theories behind the intervention?

All projects work with theories but these are seldom or often not explicated. These theories might be relatively simple ideas of causal relationships: If I do x then y will emerge. However, the theories almost always build on more complex models. To take the example of ‘psychological accompaniment’ that is discussed by Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo (2010):

“‘Psychosocial accompaniment’ is an implementation strategy developed in Latin America and inspired by Martin Baro’s and Paulo Freire’s work building on community based strategies. Psychosocial accompaniment builds on the principles associated with Freire’s dialogical conscientisation-problematisation and Martin Baro’s reflection-action. As a pragmatic methodology, it proceeds by questioning predicaments and goals in a given community’s, group’s or organisation’s priorities and practices while on the other hand supporting the given community in the attainment of these” (p. 22).

Hence, there is a philosophical basis to the intervention that needs to be explicated in any given intervention. To guide the discussion and reflection we introduce what Dahler, Larsen and Krogstrup (2003) have termed ‘theory based evaluation’, which has its origin in evaluation science.² Theory based evaluation takes as its point of departure that any project can be regarded as a program that might be tested on the basis of the assumptions about cause and effect that it makes. Through elucidating or explicating the theory behind the approach – hence theory-based evaluation – it is possible to reflect on and discuss the assumptions or hypotheses. Theory-based evaluation turns the assumptions into a number of causal

²The authors wish to thank GedskeMessell for helpful inspiration in relation to theory-based evaluation. For further elaboration on ‘theory-based evaluation’, see Dahler, Larsen and Krogstrup (2003)

relations: If x, then y. In the project of psychological accompaniment described above, this might be stated as the following causal relation: If people in places of conflict embark on a collaborative needs assessment project about themselves and their conflicts, and support the identified interventions, then conflicts can be resolved because collaborative efforts provide the opportunity to start anew. Put simply, by breaking up a project into a series of causal links, the theoretical assumptions that are often implicit can be identified and assessed. Failure to do so, can make a project unrealistic, simply because we are not able to argue for a relationship between x and y through our interventions. Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo (2010) raise the issue of the lack of “a shared language of interventions” in the Latin American context which restricts the extent to which knowledge about interventions can be shared. Clear explication of theories, assumptions about cause and effect and indicators would possibly make the development of a shared language of community interventions easier, as underlying similar constructs can be identified across various projects, if theories are described in detail.

McLeroy et al. (2003) discuss theories of change in community work in health interventions. They find that individual level changes are frequently the focus and “too rarely do community based interventions actually target organisational, community, environmental, or policy-level changes. One compelling reason is the complexity of fostering such changes and the field’s lack of knowledge about the conditions under which social change occurs; there are relatively few advances in developing a theory of community change. This inadequacy of theory seriously hampers the evaluation of community-based programs including estimation of the magnitude and timing of outcomes” (p. 532). While a lot of attention is given to activities (the what and when) and their link to outcomes in community work (logical frameworks) there is little thought around the actual processes, dynamics and conditions which lead to community change, that is, the how and why. “Theories of community change are the least explored and offer the greatest promise for documenting the effectiveness of and improvements in community-based health promotion. To achieve this, we need to make explicit our program’s assumptions about the causal relationships among an intervention’s activities and the mediating factors that lead to desired outcomes, as well as the effect of potential confounding factors” (p. 532).

Building on McLeroy et al.’s (2003) argument about the lack of focus on community factors as potential variables to effect community change, they anticipate that research would find that current work selects a limited scope of variables for manipulation with an (over) emphasis on information. This should serve as encouragement to be more curious and creative about what other factors could be manipulated in our interventions to achieve community change, and to test these theories rigorously.

What are the indicators that the assumptions of change are correct?

One of the benefits of using theory-based evaluation approaches in the planning of a project or an intervention is that they enable, in easy ways, the production of a system for evaluation. After having broken down a given project into different causal relationships of if x then y, the next step is to identify indicators. It is important to be able to measure each of the links in the causal chain leading from project to effect. It is clearly difficult to measure effect in any meaningful way, but it is imperative to have reflections on which indicators would be meaningful. They might be quantitative but they might also be more qualitative, providing points of entry to reflect on the process itself. By looking at the different steps in the causal links

proposed by the project, we are able to identify where in the process problems or successes occurred. This will enable a more systematic reflection on what can be learned from the project.

Furthermore, theory-based evaluation also allows for an exploration of the extent to which possible unsatisfactory effect relates to or emanates from ‘implementation flaws’. That is, the theory is not dispelled but the implementation lacked in quality or it was not possible to carry it out because of circumstances beyond the control of the project. However, it might also be that the failure or the problems stemmed from ‘theory-flaws’. That is, despite appropriate implementation the effect of the project was unsatisfactory. Dahler, Larsen and Krogstrup (2003) propose four different outcomes of any program, which can be seen in this table:

	Desired effect occurred	Desired effect not occurred
Program correctly implemented	Program-theory confirmed	Theory-flaw
Program not correctly implemented	Other causes explain effect. Program-theory neither confirmed nor rejected	Implementation-flaws and possible theory-flaws

A project does not need to use theory based evaluation, but it is necessary to reflect on the relationship between what was thought to happen and what actually did occur. As an example of this we might look at CSVR’s garden project for migrant women. The project asserts that the main problems for migrant women are lack of economic livelihood and social integration (context). Then a project is proposed to establish community gardens (theory: if gardens, then less poverty) which also includes South Africans (if including South Africans then more inclusion). Each of the assumptions can be made out as a causal relationship that is now testable. How to come up with the relevant indicator is often a question of creativity. It might be that we test how many birthdays the migrant children are invited for. In any case, by including the evaluation in the planning, indicators might be made up before rather than after the project has run its course. This exercise might also prevent overly ambitious projects. For example, by implementing this project, we address the root causes of violence in society. At least one would have to introduce a few more steps between project and effect.

It is useful to be explicit about how data will be collected in terms of measuring the indicators and the outcomes of the intervention (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010). Community interventions may work on political, social and mental health issues at the same time (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo, 2010) and indicators may address change at these varied levels.

What resources are required?

Human resources are an important aspect of the inputs required for a project. Another possible category for careful consideration in all projects, “Team composition and networking” is identified in the study of Latin American interventions by Jessen, Modvig and Rønsbo (2010). In their study, networks were more important to understand than individual organisations, as non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) commonly worked with community based organisations (CBO’s), local communities, state institutions, international NGOs,

universities and donors. More details about these partners and the relationships would be useful. Documenting the professional composition of the staff as well as other characteristics is useful for replication purposes as well as making reflections on:

- intercultural aspects of teams in relation to target populations;
- the use of volunteers and their training process;
- matching target populations with skilled and competent staff;
- the importance of gender, race, class distinctions in projects (Jessen, Modvig & Rønsbo 2010).

A description and quantification or costing of any other resources required to implement the programme should be considered in planning and reflection on community interventions.

What are the efficacy, efficiency and sustainability of the project?

When thinking about indicators, it is useful to consider these in relation to efficacy (did it work?), efficiency (at what cost?) and sustainability (will it last?). Exit strategies are an important component of sustainability.

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