

Chapter 112

Community–Driven Health– Impact Assessment: A Promising PATH for Promoting Community Learning and Social Responsibility for Health

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ABSTRACT

Highly participatory local health impact assessment processes can be used to identify and encourage practices and policies that promote health. They also foster community learning that can increase a community's capacity to improve local conditions for a healthier community. This chapter examines a Community-Driven form of Health Impact Assessment (CHIA) practiced in rural Nova Scotia, Canada since 1997. Experience suggests that informal learning in these processes is often transformative; ordinary citizens learn to identify factors that influence their health, to think beyond the illness problems of individuals, and to consider how programs and policies can weaken or support community health. They learn that they can identify directions for future action that will safeguard the health of their community.

INTRODUCTION

Current health promotion discourse places a high value on community participation and community empowerment. The vision is of individuals and communities who come together to learn from one another, to jointly identify issues of concern to their health and wellbeing. Community participation can extend to advocacy roles, where

citizens are called upon to collaborate with health system decision-makers and other stakeholders in the development of policy, programs and services that promote and protect health. Approaches that foster community learning and empowerment are those that emphasize citizens engaging actively with others in the determination of their own affairs. In the context of health, this extends to citizens identifying health priorities and direct-

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ing the course of health interventions in order to improve the conditions that affect their overall health. In reality, while such empowerment and capacity building approaches are participatory, they often fail because they are not truly citizen or community-driven (Kearney, 2004).

This chapter introduces a highly participatory community-driven process—the People Assessing their Health (PATH) process—that uses community health impact assessment (CHIA) to build the capacity of people to become involved in health decision-making. It engages communities in a process of reflection and discussion about what makes and keeps their community healthy. This process results in the creation of a community health impact assessment tool (CHIAT), unique to the community, that can be used by them to assess the impact of a project, program or policy on the health of the community, and to suggest things that can be done to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative effects. In this way, the PATH process provides a way to foster community participation and learning, as well as social responsibility for health at the local level.

The chapter documents the emergence and history of PATH in north-eastern Nova Scotia, Canada, and the many lessons learned from its implementation in a variety of local, national and international settings and cultural contexts since 1997. The community health impact assessment and the adult learning strategies involved are discussed extensively. Experience with PATH has revealed that the engagement of community members in these processes results in informal learning that is often transformative. As an educational process, CHIA provides a strategy that can help people to make critical value judgements about their priorities and choices and the kind of society in which they want to live. As a highly inclusive and participatory community health development process it can lead to sustainable change at the community level.

THE HEALTHY PUBLIC POLICY AND HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

Successive global health promotion agreements, most notably the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (WHO, 1986) and the *Jakarta Declaration on Health Promotion into the 21st Century* (WHO, 1997), have advocated building healthy public policy as a key action front for global health development. A *healthy public policy* is a policy that increases the health and wellbeing of those individuals and communities that it affects (Kemmer, 2001). It is oriented to the future state of health, to multiple small-scale solutions, and to the involvement of individuals and the local community in those solutions (Hancock, 1985; Mittelmark, 2001). The emphasis is on refocusing a preoccupation in public policy with the existing sick care system, to a focus on creating health (Hancock & Minkler, 2002). The development of healthy public policy relies heavily on adult learning; it recognizes that people know a great deal about what affects their health, and can be involved in planning action to improve individual and community health and wellbeing (Coady, 2009). A recent report of the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (WHO, 2008) reinforces that healthy public policy—focused on improving the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age—is now more important than ever.

Health impact assessment (HIA) is an essential tool for policy-making and practice. It is a combination of procedures, methods, and tools that systematically judges the effects of a specific action (i.e., policy, program) on the health of a defined population (Barne & Scott-Samuel, 2000), or a community. It aims to ensure the health consequences of a policy or decision are considered prior to their implementation (Kemmer, 2001), and identifies strategies and action to man-

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