

Co-powerment in the Mission-Driven Sector:
Client Participation in Program Evaluation

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Author Note:

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Abstract

This paper centers on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focused on development work in underserved populations, making the case that non-profits aimed at empowering the marginalized must fulfill their commitment to honoring the voice of the population they serve by incorporating client participation in evaluation of programs. Not only does this approach empower beneficiaries, but it also provides an invaluable resource to the organization, leading to what can be termed a “co-powering” relationship in which both parties benefit and grow. This paper illustrates four methods of client participation through the “Ladder of Evaluation” and includes a discussion of important considerations in implementing these methods. Following this is an argument for developing an organizational “culture of evaluation,” which incorporates general staff in systematically asking questions and gathering information rather than delegating evaluation to one person. Through this approach, an organization can develop the capacity to build off what has been learned through consistent monitoring and evaluation.

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Introduction: Refugee Feedback at World Relief Seattle

“World Relief put some new things in my home. They encouraged me, being a new family...they helped to take me to appointments, made appointments for me, helped me to drive everywhere...they helped with everything. That makes me happy.”

(Bikesh, Nepalese World Relief Seattle Client,
personal communication, August 12, 2014)

The non-profit sector has become an increasing presence in our society, filling gaps where the public and private sectors fall short. Although the industry has diversified greatly, charities for improving lives of the disadvantaged (in the U.S. and abroad) remain especially popular. While providing needed services and positively impacting many communities, there is growing public pressure for reforms in organizations that have historically not been held accountable. One area of concern is program evaluation, an emerging field in community development, and how to involve beneficiaries in the process. I encountered this pursuit first-hand while doing an internship during my Master’s program. This experience led me to explore the prospect of client participation and to understand its importance for organizations that desire to empower the marginalized.

During the summer of 2014, I participated as a “Refugee Resettlement Intern” at the non-profit organization World Relief Seattle, located in Kent, Washington. World Relief receives grants from the U.S. government through USAID, the Office of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance, and other agencies, as well as

donations from individuals. Their stated mission is “to be a sustainable, holistic ministry of compassion and practical support” to 2,000-plus refugee clients in the Seattle area (World Relief Seattle, 2014).

Because World Relief received government funding, evaluative measures (mostly checklists completed by caseworkers) were required in order to ensure that refugees received necessary goods and services. However, no evaluation process existed that involved direct feedback from refugees. Because the staff genuinely cared about their clients, they wanted to hear perspectives from the refugees on services they received at World Relief, and suggestions on how the organization could improve. In addition, they wanted a better understanding of refugee experience after coming to the U.S. Following a discussion of this issue with our supervisor, another intern and I decided to develop a tool to incorporate refugee feedback about services and programs into general evaluation procedure.

We began by gathering data using open-ended questions for individual or group interviews in the homes of refugees. We attempted to ask questions that were straightforward, easy to understand, non-threatening, and open ended. Beginning with each person’s story was important, not only to jog their memory, but also to gain a contextual understanding of their life and experience. We used the following questions and talking points:

1. Tell me about your experience moving to the U.S.
2. What was the hardest thing in moving to the U.S.? How did World Relief help with that?
3. What was your favorite thing about being with World Relief?

4. What was the hardest thing about being with World Relief?
5. What advice would you give to World Relief to better help new refugees?
6. What advice would you give to new refugees in the U.S.?

From those primary interviews, we created an operational questionnaire based on common themes we found: finances, community, jobs, healthcare, transportation, and general living. We then organized these topics into statements about World Relief's performance to be evaluated by respondents on a scale from 1 to 5.

The third step, which we did not complete, was to distribute the survey among a wider population of refugees and collate the answers. While creating the questionnaire, however, it became evident that a questionnaire alone would make it impossible to gain a full understanding and representation of the experiences of refugees we had interviewed. Beyond the obvious cultural diversity, language barriers, and reticence to criticize their benefactors, a more important factor stood out. World Relief wanted to hear the voice of their client, and if we limited the feedback with focused questions, we also limited the voice of the people we wanted to hear. We realized we had learned infinitely more through our open-ended questions than we could by having them simply rate how adequately the services were rendered. While a questionnaire with limited options would make it easier to measure answers, learning through qualitative research from the stories of clients gave us the truest understanding of the impact of World Relief in their lives.

This experience led me to further explore the way in which non-profits engage in evaluating themselves and the programs they offer, and I generally found a lack of evidence that most of these organizations were doing evaluative work at

all. Those that were performing evaluations often seemed more concerned about the opinions of donors than the interests of their clientele. There was a discrepancy in theory and application; while the organization's stated mission was to empower people, it rejected involvement of clients in the formulation and evaluation of the very programs designed to empower them. Non-profits aiming to empower the marginalized must fulfill their commitment to honoring the voice of the population they serve by incorporating client participation in evaluation of programs.

Aligning Values and Practice: Co-powerment through Participation

“We mustn't be so proud we can't rely on clients as a resource.”

(F. Inslee, personal communication, February 10, 2015)

At its base, most of the mission driven sector is about advancing justice and empowering people to change their situation. There are many means to this end, whether through politics, economics, education, relationships, or material provisions. Apart from organizations that exclusively respond to crises, the ideal for an NGO is to begin by “giving fish” to a community only as a precursor to “teaching them to fish.” The principles underlying practices of organizations like World Relief consider clients not only as beneficiaries, but also as potential contributors with their own strengths and resources. In development work, building capacity for sustainable growth in a certain population assumes that individuals have assets to contribute to the community. What some agencies fail to realize is that these individuals also have assets to contribute to development organizations. According to Corbett and Fikkert (2009):

Handling knowledge is a very tricky area in poverty alleviation, because the truth is that we often do have knowledge that can help the materially poor.

But we must recognize that the materially poor also have unique insights into their own cultural contexts and are facing circumstances that we do not understand very well. (p. 116)

Besides having a responsibility to listen to them, organizations can gain a valuable source of knowledge and experience from clients by having them participate in evaluating and adapting programs. Essentially, participation is “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives” (Hart, 1992, p. 5). When they are included in processes that affect their own lives and futures, clients are empowered in a way that benefits both the organization and the clients.

What does it mean to be empowered? It is important to understand this buzzword of the NGO industry, which has taken on a variety of meanings; “It is often used to refer to *processes* such as enabling, motivating, and promoting and increasing capability, but it is also used to refer to the *means* of empowerment, which can include participation, education, community organizing, and enabling political voice” (Myers, 2011, p. 218). This constitutes a broad definition. Generally, the term “empowerment” has a positive connotation, as it can be seen as a way of opening possibilities and providing means for people they would not have had otherwise. However, it has also been perceived as implying helplessness or weakness in people: “When A considers it essential for B to be empowered, A

assumes not only that B has no power...but also that A has the secret formula of a power to which B has to be initiated” (Sachs, 1992, p. 123).

In the case of client participation, a better term for what occurs is “*co-powerment*,” a relational means of growth and empowerment on both ends of an interaction (Northwest University ICCD Cohort 6, personal communication, 2014). There is an understanding that when people participate in the exploration of problems that concern them, “they have the opportunity to develop immediate and deeply relevant understandings of their situation and to be involved actively in the process of dealing with those problems” (Stringer, 2014, p. 28). Co-powerment entails a relational give-and-take when two parties work toward the same goals, even when one party has more material resources. In the end, clients are empowered through learning skills, gaining access to resources, and participating in formulating and evaluating programs that personally affect them. Organizations benefit through valuable feedback of program and organizational impact, greater understanding of the population and surrounding issues, and the possibility of tapping into myriad resources of the community.

More important than the benefits that client participation brings to development agencies, organizations have a responsibility to include beneficiaries in decisions affecting their lives. This holds true in both faith-based groups and secular organizations and is an idea supported by various relevant fields. Evangelist Bryant Myers (2011) asserted in his book, *Walking With the Poor*, that poverty reflects the broken identity of the poor, and that “participation is essential to any effort to restore a better sense of identity” (p. 214). In the field of research, ethical

considerations follow the same line of thinking. Social action research leader Earnest Stringer (2014) argued that “Evaluation should, ultimately, assess the worth and effectiveness of a set of activities or project according to its impact on the primary stakeholders” (p. 205). In the realm of development, participation is more than just an ethical piece of the process. Professor John Martinussen (2004) may have expressed it best in his book *Society, State, and Market*, dispelling the notion of participation as means to an end. Instead, he asserted that participation “is a goal itself – a goal which is inseparably related to and at the same level as the other development goals” (p. 338).

Unfortunately, most organizations in this sector have not adopted adequate practices of client participation in evaluative measures. As explained in *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*:

Similarly, tools of evaluation and performance assessment are also mostly targeted toward satisfying funder demands for assessing performance, although they have a tremendous, underutilized potential for downward accountability—by making nonprofits more accountable to communities...A more balanced approach thus requires a greater role for nonprofits in evaluating funders and for clients in evaluating nonprofits...the key point is that downward accountability mechanisms remain comparatively underdeveloped. (Renz, 2010, pp. 114; 116)

In fact, many organizations fail to evaluate their programs and services in general, and those who do usually employ traditional methods. As diagrammed by Deepa Narayan (1993) in a paper for The World Bank, this means using external

experts as evaluators, judgments based only on costs and outputs, a focus on objective and uniform procedures, one end-of-project evaluation, and high concern of accountability to donors. On the other hand, participatory evaluation uses clients and facilitators as evaluators, recognizes community-identified indicators, focuses on open-ended questions, employs frequent monitoring of programs, and is most concerned about empowering participants (p. 12).

Table 1: Traditional vs. Participatory Evaluation

Traditional Evaluation	Participatory Evaluation
External experts as evaluators	Clients as evaluators
Indicators based on cost and output	Community-identified indicators
Uniform procedures	Open-ended questions
End-of-project evaluation only	Frequent monitoring
Focus on pleasing donors	Focus on empowering participants

(Based on work by Narayan, 1993, p. 12)

It is not amiss to bring in outside experts to aid with evaluation, but it makes sense to evaluate how well a program has achieved its goals by asking those closest to the results. In their book, *Outcomes for Success*, Reisman and Clegg (2000) stressed, “The best source of information on outcomes is likely to be the participants themselves” (p. 14). Other authors (Stringer, 2014, p. 30; IDEO, 2015) have further promoted the view that regardless of how many experts are involved, programs will not meet community needs unless the people themselves become active recipients. As Stringer (2014) explained:

As practitioners in many fields now realize, unless people come to understand procedures and practices by participating in their development, any program or service is likely to have limited effects on their lives...Not only does it provide the possibility of increased human resources, it also creates conditions likely to lead to the formation of operational processes that are socially and culturally appropriate for diverse client groups. (pp. 32-33)

For organizations focused on alleviating poverty, it is important to remember that beneficiaries generally lack knowledge and material wealth as a result of external conditions, not inherent deficiencies. William Easterly argued in his 2013 work, *The Tyranny of Experts*, “The technocratic illusion is that poverty results from a shortage of expertise, whereas poverty is really about a shortage of rights. The emphasis on the problem of expertise makes the problem of rights worse” (p. 7). It is not the case that people in less-developed areas lack the desire or intelligence to better their community; they lack the means to do so. As is noted by Reddy and Ratna (2002), “The three essential elements of empowerment are: an organisation or forum, access to and use of relevant information and access to resources (structural, material, human and financial)” (p. 6).

Such principles are also found in other human rights fields. For example, the “Nothing About Us Without Us” disability empowerment movement in the 1990’s fought “to incorporate people with disabilities into the decision-making process and to recognize that the experiential knowledge of these people is pivotal in making decisions that affect their lives” (Charleton, 1998, p. 17). Besides leading to

enactment of momentous laws like the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the campaign led to involvement of disabled people in designing accessibility tools like wheelchairs, ramps, and living arrangements. A pioneer in the movement, David Werner, produced a manual that “put the **person** and the **process** before the **product**,” in which disabled individuals partner as equals with service providers, specialists, or artisans (1998, p. 1). These are the same values that come into play in the mission-driven sector: co-powerment of both the beneficiary and organization through client participation.

Methodology: The Ladder of Evaluation

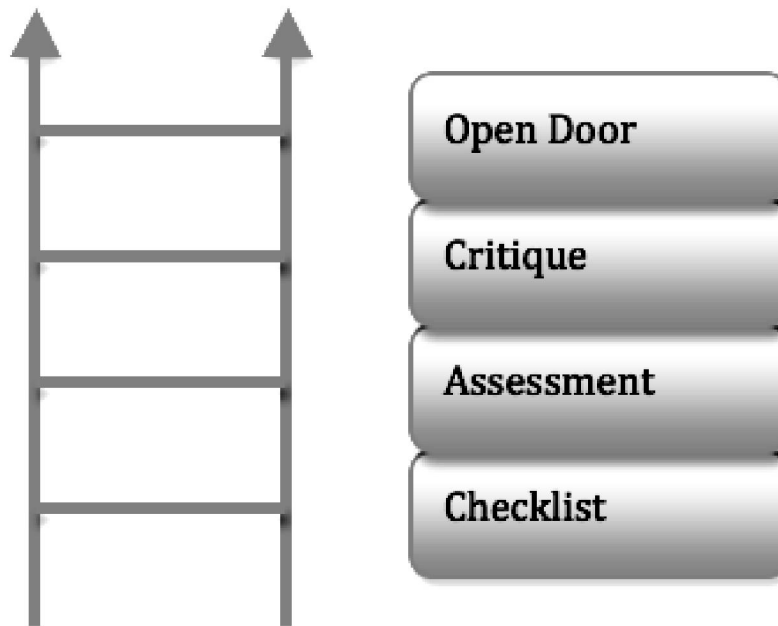
“The desire to give voice to people is derived not from an abstract ideological or theoretical imperative...Its intent is to provide a place for the perspectives of people who have previously been marginalized from opportunities to develop and operate policies, programs, and services.”

(Stringer, 2014, pp. 57-58)

To give a better understanding of what participation in evaluation looks like, I have broken down the various methods into four main levels, diagrammed in what I have dubbed, “The Ladder of Evaluation.” The first two methods, Checklist and Assessment, are quantitative, and the second two, Critique and Open Door, are qualitative. The implication of this schema is that each step up the ladder brings an organization closer to the opportune level of client participation. Some practices may not fall neatly into one category, and each method may be appropriate for

certain circumstances, depending on services rendered, resources of time and money, and type of organization (F. Inslee, personal communication, February 10, 2015). Including more than one method in evaluation is usually helpful, and mixed methods are popular in many organizations today (Dart, 2013).

While arranged in ascending order, it is not necessary for an organization to start at the bottom and work up; beginning with qualitative evaluation may be possible. However, it is important for an organization to establish which programs actually operate well, and building a solid foundation on the first two steps is a good place to start. Organizations uncomfortable with qualitative evaluation can take comfort in the structure of quantitative measures before venturing into the top tiers. There may be fear that programs will need restructuring, that opening communication will get messy and complicated, and that listening to clients may result in giving up power. However, when we reframe participation as a tool of collaboration between an organization and its beneficiaries, it empowers the organization to reach shared goals (J. Weaver, personal communication, February 17, 2015). While there is no formula to show the perfect form of evaluation for a given situation, the following breakdown of methods may prove useful in understanding possible options.

Table 2: Ladder of Evaluation¹*Method One (Quantitative): Checklist*

Checklist, the first level of evaluation, is confirmation that services were rendered by the organization. Sometimes clients are requested to acknowledge the services they received, with no additional feedback, but it may not involve beneficiary participation at all. It may only consist of a literal checklist of actions completed, done by staff members, caseworkers, or outside evaluators. There is no real evaluation of the actions taken and no research into how services affected clients. If this is the only method used, the status quo is maintained, and power remains completely in the hands of the agency. Success is defined by outcomes solely prescribed by the organization, without input from clients.

A Checklist is a good place to start if an organization needs to take stock of its programs and services, and to make sure there are no gaps in delivery. It may be

¹ This graph was inspired by Hart's "Ladder of Participation," from the essay *Children's Participation*, 1992, p. 8.

necessary for tracking how many people are enrolled in programs, and whether or not growth in numbers is occurring. Additionally, many organizations must meet standardized requirements set by funders or government policy. For example, World Relief must complete certain conditions set by state and federal laws in regard to working with refugees. The government requires that the organization provide housing, assistance obtaining Social Security, English language classes, employment services, and other necessities (World Relief, 2014). A checklist provides the necessary proof that the organization has fulfilled the requirements, but it does not involve any feedback from refugees.

While useful in some respects, this method as a standalone evaluation tool is not sufficient; it does not provide information about whether a program was useful, met appropriate needs, or should be modified. It also fails to establish or nurture a co-powering relationship between organization and client. As discussed earlier, “when others speak for you, you lose” (E. Roberts, as cited in Charleton, 1998, p. 3). Completing a checklist only serves as a token evaluation.

Method Two (Quantitative): Assessment

The second rung of the ladder, “Assessment,” includes highly structured, standardized questionnaires or surveys that evaluate participant experience to some degree through quantitative measures. A common form of gaining feedback is the Likert scale, which measures the extent to which a person agrees with a given statement by using a fixed choice response format (McLeod, 2008). Respondents choose on a scale from 1 to 5 (or 7) how strongly they agree with each statement,

which allows for numerical measurement of responses. The quantitative data can then be summarized and analyzed, preferably by using a median or a mode of all responses. This form of feedback is popular because it is relatively easy to distribute surveys, record responses, and present the data.

If data is really to reflect the beliefs of respondents, great care must be taken in constructing statements to be evaluated. Each statement should be clear, concise, and straightforward, with only one thought per proposition (i.e. no “double-barreled” statements) (Likert, 1932, p. 45). It may take a few pilot versions to make sure that participants fully understand statements, sufficient data is obtained, and the questionnaire is effective; “Not only do you get some practice in interviewing, but you also quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions... you should have thought to include in the first place” (Merriam, 2009, p. 95). A number of resources are available for help in constructing this kind of survey, and it has proven useful as a research and evaluation tool in many fields.

As useful as assessment questionnaires can be, many troubling pitfalls must be avoided. Questions may be worded ambiguously, and clients may not fully understand or know how to respond, resulting in a misrepresentation of their intended reply. This is especially true for people who are not native English speakers, have a lower level of literacy, or have completed less education. Consideration must also be given to cultural differences between those creating a survey and those responding. Besides obvious difficulties in formulating and interpreting surveys, the most essential problem is that they only measure what the

examiner deems worth discussing, leaving no room for outside-the-box feedback. As explained by qualitative researcher S. B. Merriam (2009):

...[R]igidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants' perspectives and understandings of the world. Instead, you get reactions to the investigator's preconceived notions of the world. Such an interview is also based on the shaky assumptions that respondents share a common vocabulary and that the questions will be interpreted the same by all respondents. (p. 90)

Unfortunately, the vast majority of surveys are limited in scope and influenced by the agendas, bias, and limited perspective of those who construct or assign them (Stringer, 2014, p. 22).

Even without bias, surveys miss out on information that could prove crucial to organizational and program evaluation. As my fellow intern and I learned from our experience at World Relief, "the world is full of things that may not seem to be connected but actually are; that no event occurs in isolation; that you can miss a lot by sticking to the point" (Fadiman, 2012, p. 13).

Method Three (Qualitative): Critique

Evaluation is a form of research, and organizations can draw from many tenets of the general field of Qualitative Research. Initiating qualitative feedback begins with inviting open-ended responses from participants who have received services, usually through a written or verbal survey. In a Critique format, questions ask about the strengths and weaknesses of a program, what participants found most

and least helpful, and what they would tell others about the program or organization. A simple example of this is class evaluation by participating students (ESL, skills training, etc.).

In reviewing their experience, this kind of evaluation encourages clients to focus on the past, rather than proposing potential improvements. However, if an organization is willing to utilize it, this input can be used to improve services and inform decisions for the future—decisions which remain entirely in the hands of staff. Unfortunately, as in the example of the class, many clients will not participate in the same program again and will not reap the benefits of their participation in evaluation. The organization may or may not make changes based on feedback, and those who gave it will probably not be informed about any changes made.

Although some studies have shown that anonymous surveys produce more honest responses (Alfonso, et. al, 2005), it may not always be possible to do so. It also may not be as effective. If staff members have developed trusting relationships with participants and clients believe their input is appreciated, they may be more willing to give valuable, constructive feedback. However, if an organization is concerned that participants will not give honest critique for fear of damaging their relationship with staff, an outside evaluator can provide a needed level of anonymity; my role as outside interviewer with World Relief provides an example of this.

Of course, as often happens when we invite input from those with a different viewpoint, we must be ready to listen with an open mind:

We must also be prepared for the fact that [they] will say things we do not necessarily agree with, they will ask embarrassing questions for which we do not have ready answers and they will disagree on the stands they take based on the differing realities they face. (Reddy & Ratna, 2002, p. 13)

This is at the core of qualitative inquiry, which is further discussed in the next section, the “Open Door” method of evaluation. Using qualitative data requires different skills than quantitative; the evaluator must make judgments on how to analyze and present the data. This will be considered later in the Discussion section of this paper.

Method Four (Qualitative): Open Door

The top rung of the evaluation ladder is an Open Door policy for participant input. This method involves inviting clients to help formulate changes to services and welcoming new ideas through open-ended qualitative survey. The label “Open Door” indicates its ongoing nature and implies personal relationship between clients and organizational staff. This method takes the most time and effort of the four, and it requires willingness of the agency to change what it thinks is best for clients. When an organization listens without directing feedback, it can discover new themes and information outside of the standard scope of the agency.

Unfortunately, this type of evaluation is often avoided because of its complexity; quantitative data are generally easier to collate and present. As explained by Bornstein and Davis (2010), “Other methods, such as informal interviewing, that do not produce visible outputs such as maps and charts, are

underemphasized in favor of techniques that generate attractive physical results” (p. 124). Interviewing is the most important tool in gathering feedback, and is necessary in understanding how people interpret their world. It is not always possible to observe behavior, and it is even harder to measure feelings (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). Interviews can be structured or unstructured, with the purpose being “to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). It should be more of a conversation than a question-and-answer session, but a “conversation with a purpose”(Dexter, 1970, p. 136; as quoted by Merriam, 2009).

For the purposes of evaluation, there should be enough structure to garner particular information the interviewer is interested in. This could mean anything from a large number of specific questions in a pre-designated order (highly structured), to a minimal number of topics discussed at will (unstructured), or something along the spectrum (Merriam, 2009, pp. 102-103). However, by leaving most of the interview open to unstructured exploration of certain topics, the researcher can respond according to the unique situation of each interview, to new ideas as they arise, and “to the emerging worldview of the respondent” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

When Julia Bolz, a social justice advocate and World Citizen Award winner, worked in Afghanistan building schools in rural areas, she found much more than she bargained for in doing open-ended evaluative surveys. Not only did locals identify problems and next steps for the schools, they discussed the ripple effect on society that education had brought: lower suicide rates, higher average age of marriage for girls, a breakdown in barriers between warring factions, and a new

hope for the future (personal communication, February 5, 2015). In moving forward with building more schools, Bolz was able to utilize beneficiaries as resources, fixing problems caused by initial programs and developing new programs based off of what she had learned from interviews.

Unstructured interviews are also useful as a starting point for designing quantitative evaluative measures for a mixed method approach. In our attempt to design a questionnaire for World Relief, my fellow intern and I conducted exploratory interviews to discern which topics were most salient to the refugees. We wanted to avoid accidentally leading clients to give answers they thought we were looking for, and to learn without bias the kind of questions that would be effective in future evaluations. This type of interview is “particularly useful when the researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon to ask relevant questions...One of the goals of the unstructured interview is, in fact, learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

Regardless of the type of interview conducted, it should be treated as a valuable form of client participation. If an organization makes changes based on feedback, clients should be informed of the outcome of their response. Participating in evaluation may or may not affect clients depending on whether they have completed their time with the agency or program, but they should be shown appreciation for their contribution. It is important to acknowledge their contribution and let them know how it may or may not be used to adjust services.

For the mission-driven sector, the act of providing a way for beneficiaries to speak their voice is the most important part of having them involved in evaluation: “Its intent is to provide a place for the perspectives of people who have previously been marginalized from opportunities to develop and operate policies, programs, and services” (Stringer, 2014, pp. 57-58). More than that, it can lead the way for client participation in other areas of program development and management. For many organizations and development experts focused on assisting those in need, it is considered a “best practice” to ensure beneficiary participation in each step of the program (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009, p. 111). As B. Myers emphasizes in *Walking With the Poor* (2011), “Participation is meaningful when it means ownership of the process, all the process: research and analysis, planning, implementing, and evaluating” (p. 215). Of course, the extent to which this is possible depends on the community’s capacity and willingness to be involved, as well what kind of services the organization offers.

Client participation to this extent may be overwhelming for some organizations, and they may not be ready or willing to move to the “Open Door” rung of the ladder. For organizations unprepared to shift methods, starting with subtle changes may be appropriate. No matter how minor or how slowly, change should be initiated to some degree in evaluation methods. Small improvements or modifications to existing programs may be the foot in the “door” that begins to open it a little wider.

Discussion: Where Do We Go From Here?

“Sometimes as a development organization we don’t want to take the risk of really empowering people to the point that they really own the projects. [If we do that] we will be working ourselves out of a job.”

(World Vision staff member in Zimbabwe; as cited in Bornstein, 2005, p. 124)

Although this paper focuses on the big picture of client participation, some logistics are worth discussing here. As program evaluator Jennifer Weaver explained, since program evaluation is still a developing field, organizations often devise their own system based on what success means to them (personal communication, February 17, 2015). To her, making the move from program development to program evaluation is not a big leap, since evaluation informs development. Regardless of which model an organization is implementing, important considerations include whom to interview, which questions to ask, who should be the one(s) to conduct interviews, how to process the results, and what happens to the data.

Each organization, being unique, will have to figure out whose input they want to gather during evaluation. For example, child-sponsorship agencies should ask the children in their programs to evaluate their experience during and after they graduate from it, as well as include input from family and members of the community affected by the program. Homeless shelters would involve their homeless clients in evaluation and design of programs. In deciding which clients to include during my project with World Relief, it was important to have a representative sample of the different groups of people coming to the U.S. as

refugees. At the time, the countries of origin included Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Burma, and the Congo, but even within those nationalities, there were varied socioeconomic backgrounds that affected personal experience. For example, some Iraqis spoke no English and had worked as drivers for the U.S. military, while others had been engineers or doctors with almost perfect English skills. We wanted to include as much of this variation as possible in understanding client experience with World Relief.

The next consideration was the amount of time that had passed since arrival to the U.S. We wanted to survey people who had completed their time in World Relief's programs, but still had fresh recall of the experience in their mind. World Relief is most heavily involved with refugees during their first ninety days after arrival, but continues to aid them in various ways for months, depending on need. We decided to interview clients who had been in the U.S. between ten months and one year. This presented some difficulty, as many families had moved and had not provided World Relief with their new address. As many research studies before us had encountered, we discovered the complications of follow-up. Thankfully, most clients still had the same phone numbers on record, and we were able to contact representatives from each country.

After securing contact, it is important to know which questions to ask or topics to discuss. Confirming the services that clients have actually participated in is a good place to start, followed by "engag[ing] in processes that enable participants to make judgments about the effectiveness and worth of their activities" (Stringer, 2014, p. 206). According to program evaluator Jess Dart (2013), in order to avoid

having too many evaluation questions, they should be “bigger picture and cohesive.” Using initial findings to inform further data collection, evaluators can develop tentative categories and themes, determining which factors are important.

Some evaluations are done for internal purposes; others are required by outside stakeholders. If a funder insists on seeing certain results, evaluation questions will be dictated to some degree by these outcomes. This means including information that stakeholders deem important. It does *not* mean excluding questions that could reflect poorly on the organization or its programs. There may be a conflict of interest when funding depends on success: “Yet however well intentioned, every NGO has to answer to the people who pay its bills” (Bond, 2012, p. 321). No matter what kind of evaluation stakeholders require, “Decisions must be judged in light of what they do *for* the poor, what they do *to* the poor, and what they enable the poor to do *for themselves*” (Groody, 2007, p. 108). Evaluators must always keep these values in mind when determining success of a program.

Another question to consider is how an organization decides who performs the evaluation. Some agencies employ full or part-time program evaluators, and some hire external evaluators when needed. These experts bring their own experience and perspective to the table and can provide an objective assessment that internal staff cannot. Many small NGOs do not have the budget for external evaluators, which means that some or all of the staff fill the role of evaluator. As Dart (2013) argued, monitoring and evaluation should be built into general staff capacity, not relegated to an evaluator in the corner. In this way, information from the evaluation is more likely to be understood and used.

Some extra considerations should be made depending on the sensitivity of information, cultural concerns, and personality. For example, when I interviewed an Afghani woman in her home, I quickly realized it would have been helpful to bring a translator, or at least wait until her English-speaking husband was home. I was unable to ask deeper questions or even be sure she understood the simpler ones. For my male colleague, it would have been even more difficult to conduct an interview, as it would have been inappropriate for him to be alone with her, and she may have been too uncomfortable to answer questions at all. The material was not particularly sensitive, but many other organizations have programs that do involve delicate information.

Asking individuals about topics such as personal health concerns, economic disadvantages, or addictions can make people feel embarrassed and reticent to talk. Addressing these kinds of issues takes a skilled interviewer who has empathy, is good at earning trust, and can use tools of qualitative research in “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

Regardless of who is doing the evaluation, it is important to collect data that will enable people to judge whether activities were successful in accomplishing goals of the program or project; if goals were not met, the data should show what might account for its failure (Stringer, 2014, p. 206). Determining whether a project is successful depends to a great extent on how well outcomes were established before its implementation—a process outside the scope of this paper. In uncovering reasons why outcomes were not met, qualitative exploration is the key to providing

answers. After gathering data, it can be processed by finding recurring regularities and patterns that answer the initial evaluation questions, as well as providing insight into other discoveries.

What happens to the data after it is compiled and processed? In the end, the purpose of the evaluation is to be used, so it must be submitted to the appropriate audiences. This could range from the general public to board members to project teams. The same findings may be presented in different formats for different purposes and audiences. Especially important are reports for the project team or program staff who need information to make decisions about the future of the program.

Regardless of audience, some general guidelines in writing reports include: avoid jargon, write clearly and use efficient structure, use data cohesively to answer the big questions, substantiate findings with evidence, and provide enough information so that someone else can interpret your findings and check your conclusions (Dart, 2013). These guidelines are especially important in presenting qualitative data, which has no standard format. Visual images like charts and graphs can be helpful for the audience in processing information, and there should be enough context that an intelligent outside reader could understand the report.

According to Dart (2013), good evaluation is not just presenting data, but using it to make a judgment in answering the evaluation questions, offering both evidence and a verdict. If the evidence proves the program was successful, say so. If not, explain why it was not. Even if it was generally successful, reveal the negative

results as well. Real progress comes from honesty, and without it organizations miss opportunities for growth.

Unfortunately, conflict of interest arises when the future of a program or organization depends on its current success, but there is an emerging trend of transparency in global development organizations (J. Weaver, personal communication, February 17, 2015). People are becoming more aware of the problem NGOs face in balancing less-attractive, highly effective services and sexier, less-effective programs with a track record for profitable fund raising. As David Roodman (2009) put it honestly:

Our sensitivity to stories and faces distorts how we give, and thus what charities do and how they sell themselves...And how far should nonprofits go in misrepresenting what they do in order to fund it? It is not an easy question: What if honesty reduces funding?

If honesty reduces funding from the people supporting your organization, find people who value honesty and ask them to support the agency instead. As J. Weaver affirmed in a recent interview, “success and values don’t have to conflict” (personal communication, February 17, 2015). Prove to donors that your organization is transparent, evolving, and learning from evaluation—evaluation that involves the very clients that donors care about. If proof is given to funders that the organization is empowering its beneficiaries through client participation, the result will be an attractive *and* highly effective method, making it worth being honest.

Effective Organizations: Practicing a Culture of Evaluation

“If you don’t reflect, you can’t learn.”

(Paula Rowland, personal communication, February 12, 2015)

Using evaluation to learn and to be accountable as an organization should be a universal process, but it is not a common practice for many agencies in the non-profit industry. In his watershed book, *The White Man’s Burden*, William Easterly (2006) decried lack of accountability in the NGO field: “Aid agencies are rewarded for setting goals rather than reaching them, since goals are observable to the rich-country public while results are not” (p. 185). He pointed out that even a study done by the World Bank in the early 2000’s began by confessing, “Despite the billions of dollars spent on development assistance each year, there is still very little known about the actual impacts of projects on the poor” (p. 194).

Implementation of suitable evaluative measures is long overdue. For those who do have measures in place, Easterly asks, “when internal evaluation points out failure, do aid agencies hold anyone responsible or change agency practices?” (p. 193). Even organizations that tout evaluation as part of their process may not actually be applying it.

For evaluation to be successfully applied, it should be built into general staff capacity, not tacked on as an afterthought. Effective organizations develop a “culture of evaluation,” in which members systematically ask questions and gather information, building off what is learned through consistent monitoring and evaluation (J. Bolz, personal communication, February 5, 2015). This improves an organization’s services and makes long-term positive change. As explained by

Gislason and Tirona (2011), “Organizations with feedback cultures are fiercely committed to learning and growth, open communication, and high-trust working relationships. To that end, they invest in the skills, systems, and culture needed for feedback to take root.” A culture of evaluation affects every area of an organization. J. Dart (2013) found that not only do programs and services benefit, employees have higher job satisfaction and are better informed in their work. According to her, organizations that practice a culture of evaluation achieve more outcomes, are able to use evidence to tell their story in a compelling way, and obtain more funding. In addition, donors are happy to know the people they are trying to help are being empowered by being included in programs (Dart, 2013).

One great example of a successful organization practicing a culture of evaluation is Medic Mobile, whose website states: “Medic Mobile uses communication technologies to improve the health of under-served and disconnected communities. We see communication gaps through the eyes of community-based health workers and patients, guiding our partners towards low-cost technologies and efficient health services” (2014). One of the guiding principles of the company is “design thinking,” or a “human-centered design process,” based off of the practices of IDEO, a global design consultancy. This human-centered design process “relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that are emotionally meaningful as well as functional, and to express ourselves through means beyond words or symbols,” taking into account the capabilities of everyone involved (IDEO, 2014).

In a 2014 TEDx talk, Isaac Holeman, one of the founding directors of Medic Mobile, explained the process of how Medic Mobile develops strategies and products “with the people on their turf, on their terms.” “Design Cards,” like large flashcards with simple drawings of various people, items, and places, are used with community members, health care workers, NGO partners, and staff to have large-group discussions about existing systems and new possibilities. Even illiterate members of the group can participate, as language barriers are less of an issue when pictures are used. Using these cards in villages has led to open conversation and information that patients would not likely discuss in a hospital setting. The information gained from these meetings is applied locally, not simply taken back to America for “experts” to appraise, and people can see how much their contributions matter. Discussions using the cards have helped create systems for immunizations, prenatal care, monitoring stock and disease tracking (Holeman, 2014). Not only does this culture of evaluation apply to staff members, but also to clients participating in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs.

In reference to the importance of local contributors, Holeman (2014) explained, “a lot of the insights we really need are only accessible when [they] start being treated like team members.” This takes humility and affection on the part of staff that comes from spending time with clients and building solidarity through relationships. Many of the community-specific barriers to health can only be understood by being with someone in the field, since much information is lost along the way in transmitting the situation through reports. When these people are

allowed voice and authority in the effort to overcome barriers, lasting solutions emerge.

Besides including client participation in monitoring program effectiveness and progress, Medic Mobile uses specific indicators for patient health outcomes, efficiency and quality of services (Medic Mobile, 2014). As Lynch and Walls (2009) said, "You measure what is important. If it is not measured, it is likely not something that you are trying to improve" (p. 131). Using mixed methods and quantitative data has proven useful for determining certain outcomes. Even from the beginning with their first program implementation in Malawi, Medic Mobile assessed tangible results: "The hospital saved approximately 2,048 hours of worker time, \$2,750 on net (\$3,000 in fuel savings minus \$250 in operational costs), and doubled the capacity of the tuberculosis treatment program (up to 200 patients)" (Mahmud, Rodriguez, & Nesbit, 2010, p. 137). Another example of quantitative evaluation in a successful program is the increase in vaccination rates in a participating area in India from 60% to 90% (Mulago, 2013).

Not only does Medic Mobile monitor final outcomes, but they also conduct needs assessments in various areas in formative evaluation, doing pretests to determine a baseline. After the network is put in place, it is monitored with routinely collected statistics through process evaluation. Later outcomes are assessed during the summative evaluation by comparing baseline data, as well as comparing participating groups with other groups not in the program (Lemay, et. al, 2012, p. 105). The whole process is informed by the organization's culture of evaluation, and it shows in their achievements.

Conclusion: The Power of Listening

“At the end of the day, dignity is more important to the human spirit than wealth.”

(Novogratz, 2009)

In describing his experience working with homeless youth in Seattle, Ron Ruthruff (2010) emphasized that “We cannot underestimate the power of listening” (p. 40). He urged organizations to “Imagine a missiology that revolves around listening and learning as much as teaching and speaking. What would it mean if we listened and learned as we served the widow, orphan, and stranger?” (p. 19). For non-profits serving members of communities in need, it would mean involving people in the creation and evaluation of programs that affect their own development. The focus of an organization such as this should consistently be on bringing justice and dignity to those being served. In his book, *Walking with the Poor*, Myers (2011) aptly put it this way: “*Love the people, not the program. We always need to remember who our ‘customer’ is. We are here to serve people, not programs*” (p. 220, original italics).

Even Saint Augustine declared as much 1600 years ago when he said, “Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.” Simply providing programs is not enough. Many organizations and individuals feel that by giving some sort of tangible aid, they can fully satisfy the needs of others. However, people need more than material goods; building a co-powering relationship through participation is really where lasting change is made. In explaining Camano Island Coffee’s principle of building relationships with their farmers in developing countries, social entrepreneur Jeff Erikson explained, “People want you to walk with them in their

journey, not give them a lot of money or aid” (personal communication, May 8, 2014). This is, in fact, a Biblical principle. God declares in Micah 6:8, “I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices” (New Living Translation). Julia Bolz explained her philosophy in bringing education to thousands of children in war-torn Afghanistan: “God’s not asking us to save the world; he’s asking us to walk with people” (personal communication, February 5, 2015).

Even for organizations that are not faith-based, the same principles apply, and the implications of listening and inviting participation are farther-reaching than the NGO world. Businesses can become more effective and attractive to consumers, governments can achieve deeper change in the lives of citizens, and individuals can more constructively affect the world around them. As individuals, we can apply the principle of gaining qualitative information through *listening* to the stories and perspectives of those around us to gain a broader, deeper understanding of each other and the overarching human condition. As Galileo once said, “I have never met a man so ignorant I could not learn something from him.” If we can view the world through such a lens and learn from each other, we can be of maximum service as individuals and as organizations working to serve the marginalized. “The incredible truth is that they, with all their courage and faith, have much to teach us if we are willing to take the time to listen. This is the treasure that must not be buried and forgotten” (Ruthruff, 2010, p. 36).

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