



# Evaluation of a community-based participatory research process: The Detroit Healthy Environments Partnership

Barbara A. Israel, DrPH, Denise C. Carty, MA, MS, Sharon Sand, MPP, Amy J. Schulz, PhD, Sheryl Weir, MPH, Causandra Gaines, BA

Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan School of Public Health

## Background

The Healthy Environments Partnership (HEP) has been working since 2000 to examine and address relationships between environmental conditions and cardiovascular health in three ethnically-diverse Detroit communities.

HEP uses a community-based participatory research (CBPR) process which involves equitable engagement of representatives from community-based organizations, health service organizations, and academic institutions in all phases of the research and intervention process.

The HEP Steering Committee, with representatives from each of the partner organizations, meets on a monthly basis to discuss, provide input, and finalize decisions regarding the Partnership's ongoing efforts to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease in Detroit neighborhoods.

## Evaluation Design

### Goals and Objectives

To conduct a participatory, formative evaluation process to:

- assess partnership group dynamics;
- assess the extent to which we adhered to agreed upon CBPR principles;
- examine partners' assessments of intermediate measures of partnership effectiveness; and
- integrate evaluation findings into an ongoing process to strengthen the partnership.

### Conceptual Framework

The objectives and themes for the evaluation were drawn from a conceptual framework for assessing group dynamics shown in the Figure. The framework illustrates how group dynamics are linked with other model components to facilitate effective CBPR partnerships.

### Participatory Process

The evaluation of partnership dynamics is formative, participatory, and ongoing. Steering Committee (SC) members are actively engaged in:

- developing the evaluation questions;
- interpreting the results; and
- using the findings as a basis to decide actions to strengthen the partnership.

Results were presented and prioritized for follow up at monthly SC meetings, and SC members continue to integrate findings into joint decisions regarding HEP priorities, process, and activities.

## Methods

### Data collection: In-depth interviews

- Interview questions were developed by the evaluation team in conjunction with the HEP Steering Committee, using a participatory and iterative process guided by the conceptual framework
- Thirteen interviews conducted; average 90 minutes each
- Interviews audiotaped and transcribed

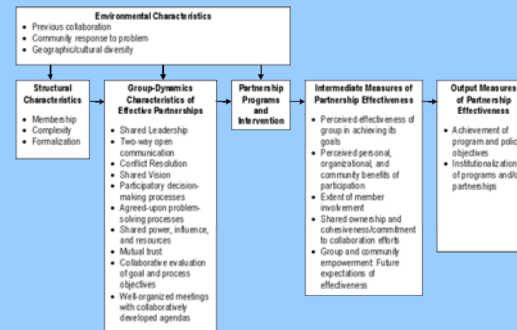
### Data analysis

- Interview responses analyzed using focused codes
- Codes were agreed upon between evaluation staff who conducted the interviews

### Data feedback, interpretation, and action

- Report of themes disseminated to Steering Committee (SC)
- Discussion of findings at SC meeting
- SC prioritized selected findings for further discussion
- SC acted on key findings to improve partnership functioning

Figure. Conceptual framework for assessing group dynamics in CBPR partnerships (Schulz et al. 2003)



## Results

The evaluation results echoed many dimensions of effective partnerships outlined in the conceptual model. Below we highlight selected themes that emerged from the analysis of partner responses.

### What are some key accomplishments of the partnership?

- Evolution, growth, and longevity of partnership
- A strong, cohesive, and committed group
- Diversity of partnership
- Data collection and community dissemination
- Major grants and publications
- Subcontracts with community-based organizations

## Results (cont.)

### What are some of the facilitating factors?

- Partnership's solid foundation
- Adherence to group norms and CBPR process
- Knowledge and experience of partners
- Trust and camaraderie among partners
- Member investment and commitment
- Retreats; team building
- Leadership of partnership staff
- Community partners as co-authors and co-presenters

### What are the advantages or benefits of partnership?

- Research that benefits the community
- Grants and projects bring resources into the community
- Produces findings (data) that justify community needs
- Designs practical and useful interventions
- Shares information and raises awareness
- Capacity-building (community staff, CBPR skills)
- Has the potential to impact policy

### What are the challenges of the partnership?

- Shared decision-making & consensus-building take time
- Deciding how and when to engage partners in day-to-day operations
- Inconsistent member attendance
- Ensuring broad representation on the Steering Committee
- Unpredictable funding to support core partnerships

## Actions Taken

In response to the evaluation, the Steering Committee identified five priorities for continued attention by the partnership.

- Broaden representation and membership
- Foster more collaborations and member linkages
- Establish more equitable and shared leadership between university and community partners
- Engage in developing strategies for policy change
- Work to achieve sustainability

Since these priorities were identified the following actions have been taken:

- Developed new linkages in the community
- Identified opportunities for policy training
- Conducting follow-up evaluation with process questionnaire and focus groups
- Increased attention to equitable and shared leadership and ongoing capacity-building in continuing work and new proposals
- Drafted papers for publication examining several identified themes (e.g., community representation, partnership synergy)



## Lessons Learned / Implications for Practice

### Conducting a formative, participatory evaluation

- A conceptual framework facilitated engagement of partners in designing the evaluation and developing the questionnaire.
- The dynamic and evolving nature of the partnership called for continued data collection to ensure relevant and current evaluation results.
- Qualitative interviews promoted nuanced and diverse responses.
- Evaluation results facilitated subsequent actions to improve the partnership by:
  - identifying strengths of the current partnership process;
  - identifying areas for attention by the partnership to strengthen its process; and
  - providing a forum for discussion of partnership dynamics.

### CBPR Partnerships

- CBPR process was recognized as beneficial, although time-intensive.
- Participatory activities (e.g., small group discussions, icebreakers) enhanced the development of positive relationships and engagement of all partners.
- Attention to group operating norms and CBPR principles (e.g., shared leadership roles, co-presentations, data ownership) fostered trust and open communication.
- Research findings were perceived by community partners as beneficial when generated in a participatory manner and directed towards tangible interventions.
- The partnership created a vision and model for systemic change that stimulated interventions and policy initiatives by members.

## Acknowledgments

The Healthy Environments Partnership (HEP) <http://www.hpdetroit.org/> is a project of the Detroit Community-Academic Urban Research Center <http://www.sph.umich.edu/urc/>, with funding from NIEHS (1 R01 ES10936-05; 1 R01 ES014234-01) and NCMHHD (1 R24 MD001619-01). The partners that have been involved in HEP are: Brightmoor Community Center, Boulevard Harambee, Friends of Parkside, Detroit Department of Health and Wellness Promotion, Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, Henry Ford Health System (AIM HI), Rebuilding Communities Incorporated, Southwest Solutions, Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision, University of Michigan Schools of Public Health, Nursing, Social Work, Architecture and Urban Planning, and the Institute for Social Research.