OUR PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH AND CAPACITY BUILDING

(Excerpt from the report *"Gay Men Building Local Knowledge: community-based research in HIV prevention & health promotion"* pp. 11-12, by Rick Marchand, Community Based Research Centre, Vancouver)

What we know about community based research has been informed by our experience in HIV community groups. We learned early on that research could be used strategically as an intervention. We recognized that engagement in community research helps a community program stay focused on its target audience. Knowing the trends in a community's culture helps a program to be relevant and effective. Those using a health promotion approach will recognize that community based research is an integral part of program development.

Community based research – research by and for communities – uses diverse models, methods and structures. We have yet to realize the benefits of community based research. We are still developing the resources of mandated agencies and their staff, volunteers and members to control the process of inquiry and knowledge development.

This does not mean that program managers and outreach workers must become researchers. Community personnel can improve their own practice and programs by learning to use research strategically. This can range from documenting experience and actively listening to community members to managing knowledge development activities and recognizing when to use action research to reorient a program or develop a new service.

Research capacity building is a community development issue. Health Canada's CBR Research Capacity Building Program is helping to address this. As we gain experience with research capacity building, appropriate principles and core values, separate from community based research itself, need to be developed. We hope that the reflections and experience of this project can help to articulate some of these principles.

This vision of community knowledge development is about community agencies conducting, interpreting and controlling research as a standard of good community health practice. Community groups need the tools and resources to be able to fulfill their obligation to serve. Research techniques are tools for mobilization, organization, listening and systematic understanding of community culture. Research processes are tools for community and agency critical reflection.

Community based research puts the issues and questions of community organizations and the communities they serve at the centre of the research. This differs from academic research where the concerns and questions of the investigator most often drive the research agenda. We have always encouraged community groups to form equitable partnerships with researchers, including academic researchers, in order to develop local knowledge about the communities they serve. But community groups need access to funds no matter where the researcher is located.

Based on our experiences in this project, we recommend that the following practice issues be considered by other communities doing research capacity building.

Consultations: Consult with the relevant target community before developing the capacity building program. Involve the key community and research personnel in the activities of capacity building. Identify the critical issues.

Assess the Social Environment: Assess the current issues affecting the community and identified by community groups, and match people's concerns with appropriate activities.

Contextualize: Capacity building is more effective and relevant if it is contextualized within the target community's current issues, questions and culture. By contextualizing our capacity building efforts, participants had to consider the impact of their work on the lives of gay men.

Promote Experience Exchange: Enabling researchers and program coordinators to exchange experience can be an effective learning opportunity. This engagement means working collaboratively to identify gaps in knowledge and appropriate actions. Collaborative learning works well for capacity building. It provides an opportunity for mutual learning.

Assessment Activities: Bringing participants together to assess the current environment, issues, research and programs is a basic research capacity building activity. Provide a context for assessment. We focused on reported rising HIV infection rates in gay men.

Present Local Community Based Research: Locate and profile the community research projects of the target community.

Provide a Range of Activities: Provide a range of learning experiences for those involved. Capacity building means being sensitive to the multiple learning styles of adults.

Critical Reflection: Ensure that activities promote opportunities for interpreting past experiences of the work.

Customize Tools: Produce resources and tools to assist participants. For example, we created a template for presenting the CBR projects. This common framework enabled the presenters to easily report on the findings and process of the research project.

Promote Networking: Promote networking in all your activities. Relationship building is an integral part of capacity building.

Provide Resources: Ensure that appropriate resources are available. Encourage participants to contribute resources. Audio tape some of the workshops and create a resource.

Developing Research Skills: Some capacity building activities can include skills that are used by both the researcher and educator, like active listening and documentation. This can also include learning when to use research or how to plan and manage a research project.

Engage Participants: Being provocative is a good way to focus the attention of community members. With so many competing agendas for community personnel, it can be effective to pose a burning question. We asked the community about rising HIV infection rates.

Set Goals and Outcomes: Framing the research capacity building activities with achievable goals and outcomes can help in identifying the next steps.

Document the Capacity Building Experience: Producing a final document of the experience can help participants move to the next steps. Audio taping sessions enables data to be collected, organized and interpreted, and can provide a comprehensive picture back to participants.