



## Participatory Evaluation: a Method to Empower Communities

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### Abstract

*In 2009 a team of researchers of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) worked with managers and technicians of Catalan Government to design a framework plan to the participatory evaluation of community development plans. This community development plans had been implementing in Catalonia since 1996. We developed the research project through a participatory methodology and designed the framework plan but never applied it. We worked on the indicators of evaluation, on the instruments to gathering data, and on the protocol to develop participatory evaluation in each community.*

*At the end of 2010 we got funding from Science and Innovation Ministry of Spain to develop a research, which takes as its starting point that previous work (Ref. EDU2010-15122). The research team was formed by a group of researchers, coming from three different universities –Barcelona; Autònoma de Barcelona; and Girona. Also by a Foundation (Citilab), which is focused on research processes "Knowledge Society". All of these researchers converge from their scientific careers in a specific research line: participatory evaluation in the community. A methodology of educational work, through personal interactions and social networks technologically mediated, produces participants' learning and initiates processes of empowerment and social innovation.*

*This research called "Participatory evaluation of community action as a learning methodology to individual and community empowerment" seeks to answer a question related to social education and community participation processes and socio-educational work in the community. We want to know if participatory processes -both physical and virtual- developed in the framework of Community actions generate learning that empowers people who develop them. To answer this question we are going to use an intervention methodology that has emerged strongly in recent years: the participatory evaluation.*

*In this paper we want to present the methodology we will use to develop this research project that will last next three years.*

### 1. Introduction

Community Development Plans (CDP) are a social and territorial strategy which aim, through a participatory process, to give global answers to the needs of a community, in order to improve the quality of life of the people in the territory [3].

This initiative began in Catalonia in 1996, when the two first CDP's were implemented as a pilot test in two communities. Since then, they have been expanded throughout the territory. Now there are 80 CDP's in rural and urban areas.

The Government of Catalonia, in collaboration with civic and social entities and organizations of the areas concerned, give institutional and economic support to these community work strategies. The aim is to provide resources to territory bodies so that, through a process of political decentralization, it is the communities themselves, which "achieve real, sustainable social transformation, via the empowerment of the neighborhoods, districts, regions, organizations and the citizens" [3].

In 2008 our research team was contacted with the aim of exploring new models of evaluation for the CDP's.

The project supervisors argued that the evidence and strategies that were being developed had proved to be inadequate, and that they needed another evaluation model which provided qualitative



information about those projects. As a result, an agreement was signed between the Government of Catalonia and the group or researchers at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, in order to devise a **Participatory Evaluation Framework Plan of the Community Projects of Catalonia**.

The group of investigators set about designing this framework plan on the basis of the strategy of Participatory Evaluation (PE). PE is a method of working with and in the community, used to evaluate intervention programmes in the social field. It proposes evaluation processes as a learning tool at the service of the whole community.

Cousins (2003) [1], regards PE as a new focus, in which people trained in evaluation methods try to implement evaluation activities with other people who are not qualified in these practices. Experts and non-experts in evaluation, work together in some or all of the activities necessary to generate a shared evaluative knowledge of the actions and projects in which they participate or from whose results they could be affected. In these evaluation models, the design of the aims and the construction of evaluation variables and indicators arise from the contributions and real needs expressed by the people.

## 2. Participatory work for the designing of the Evaluation Framework Plan.

In autumn of 2008 we began work on the drawing up of the Framework Participatory Evaluation Plan, in which we designed the variables and indicators of evaluation, the techniques and tools for data collection, and, finally, the design of a general protocol of application for developing PE in the communities. According to Fetterman and Wandersman, we thought that the evaluation processes needed to be adaptable and not adopted by the communities, since "uniform methodologies are not realistic given the diversity in the communities" (2007:187) [2]. This means that we were to design general operating guidelines for PE, which, in a second phase, would have to be adapted to the reality of each application context.

In the preparation of this first phase, a working team was set up, consisting of several agents, related in some way with the CDP's. The three collective representatives are:

- Technicians of the Catalan Government, who supervise in a general way all the CDP's which are currently being developed.
- Community technicians, responsible for managing a CDP in a specific community.
- Researchers of the Universitat Autònoma De Barcelona.

The methodology used in the participatory process was divided into two phases: a) Preparatory work of the research team b) participatory design, based on teamwork.

### 2.1 Preparatory work

A documentary review of the evaluation report of the CDP's was carried out. We analyzed 55 reports, corresponding to the community projects in progress in the summer of 2008. This work provided us with information about the evaluation model used in the CDP's. Analysis showed that the report included aspects such as: a) number of participants expected/real, b) number of projects developed and their subject c) work aims of the projects d) number and description of the activities included in each project e) financial record of each project. Suarez-Balcazar (2003) [5], confirms this trend in the field of community work, in which evaluation is used to provide information about the number of people attended or the workshops run, but does not necessarily include any other kind of qualitative data.

The previous knowledge generated by the group of researchers served to identify how evaluation of the CDP's was to be carried out and to make an initial proposal of variables and indicators of evaluation. This proposal was to be one of the central axes of participatory work with the community technicians, since in subsequent meetings it was to be reformulated until it became a final proposal.

### 2.2 Participatory design

4 working meetings were held, and a final presentation of the Participatory Evaluation Framework Plan was designed.

In the first meeting, the aims of the research were explained and key guidelines on the theoretical and methodological principles of the PE strategy were given. The fundamental aim was to place the participants in the P. E. Framework Plan and make them aware of their role as main actors in the



process of design and development. The idea was that the group of technicians would gain basic knowledge of PE strategy and combines this with their specific knowledge of the CDP's.

According to Martí (2005) [4] in community work, it is necessary to combine theoretical-scientific knowledge with knowledge of the people, which are living in the areas. In our case, we combined knowledge of the evaluative methodology and research procedures of the university staff with knowledge of the everyday management of the CDP's and knowledge that the technicians have of the community in which these programmes have been introduced.

Throughout the three working sessions documents were agreed upon concerning the following issues:

- Sources of information in each of the territories.
- Characteristics of the community technicians
- Type of associations or entities existing in the territories.
- Structure of the community evaluation team.
- Map of participants
- Variables and indicators of evaluation
- Development of an overall PE application protocol.

### 3. The process of research on participatory evaluation

In 2010 the research group was expanded with researchers from the universities of Barcelona and Girona and from the foundation Citilab. Based on the experience of these groups and the earlier work on PE begun two years previously, an R + D +I (Research, Development and Innovation) project was presented to the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. All the researchers converged, from their different scientific disciplines, into one specific line of research: participatory evaluation in the communities. The research financed for the period 2010-2013 carries the title "Participatory evaluation of community actions as a method of learning for personal and community empowerment" (Nº Ref EDU2010-15122).

The overall aim of the project consists of applying the strategy of PE in the evaluation of CDP's in Cataluña, through a methodology of case studies. For this, and in collaboration with all the agents involved – supervising technicians of the Government of Cataluña, community CDP technicians, citizens of the territories, local responsible politicians, researchers, etc., we aim to evaluate in a participatory way 4 CDP's.

For the design of the PE methodology in the CDP's, the research group relied on national and international scientific literature.

Throughout this first year of work on the project, our work has concentrated on:

- Theoretical-practical groundwork. Using bibliographical review and analysis, search was focused around the descriptors: participatory evaluation, empowerment, community based participatory research, empowerment evaluation, community action. Sources from 2000 to the present day were consulted.
- Methodological and instrumental design. In this first year of work on the project were are working on:
  - Creating a database of experiences, projects and programmes of participatory evaluation.
  - Creating a theoretical framework that allows updates theories, research, experiences and national and international practices of PE and empowerment.
  - Constructing a set of indicators of individual and community empowerment.
  - Building a web portal of the project: **Portal of participatory evaluation and community empowerment.**
  - Reviewing the variables and indicators of evaluation created in 2008.
  - Preparing entry into the different territories: initial negotiations to become acquainted with the people of the communities and shaping each of the evaluation teams.

### 4. Results we hope to attain.

The results we hope to attain are structured on two lines of work: a) to show the usefulness of PE as a method of evaluation for the CDP's and, as a consequence, the improvement of the latter and; b) personal and community empowerment of the actors involved in the PE process. To achieve this, we intend to use the PE processes as pedagogic processes, since they suppose the beginning of a



process of community empowerment in which people, groups, and collectives gradually assume the main role in the handling of situations and problems in their daily lives.

#### **4.1 Improvement of the evaluated CDP**

Our aim is that the participation of those people involved will, by its own synergies, constitute an opportunity for improving the programmes evaluated. We consider that the opinions and knowledge of the users of the activities designed generate valid information for the improvement and readjustment of the CDP's evaluated.

#### **4.2 Personal and community empowerment of the actors involved in the PE process.**

Community participation is the axis around which is constructed the whole PE process. Through its involvement, we aim to achieve:

- The acquisition of new values, tools, attitudes and knowledge on behalf of the community members.
- The handing over of responsibility and control of the activities, programmes and community projects developed.
- Analysis, reflection and resolution of people's situations and problems in the heart of the community.
- Interiorization of attitudes of change, which will have a bearing on the improvement of the conditions of life in the community.

One of the aims of the research project is to be able to identify correctly these learning processes, generated in the PE process. Measurement of the achievement or otherwise of these processes will be carried out via a set of indicators of individual and community empowerment. In this way, we will be able to identify, describe and analyze which strategies and activities developed during the PE process produce individual and community empowerment.

### **5. Conclusions**

The scientific literature on PE indicates the existence of two major trends into which all analytical models can be divided: Practical-Participatory Evaluation and Transformative-Participatory Evaluation [1]. From our experience, we opt for working with evaluative processes, which facilitate transformation and social change, through transformative, responsible and educative community actions.

Evaluation of the CDP's through the strategy of PE can favor the stimulation and vitalization of the structures, networks and agents in the community.

### **6. References**

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