

SQEP Quebec October, 99

Karmela Krleza-Jeric and Sandra Frosst, Montreal

Participatory Evaluation of the Notre-Dame-de-Grace Community Council's Citizen Engagement Initiative

The Citizen Engagement Initiative (CEI) is a project of the Notre-Dame-de-Grace Community Council.

Here we wish to present our experience with the *process* of participatory evaluation in the context of a volunteer based community development project.

We have also tried in our presentation to address the first of the three themes suggested by the Conference organizers, namely what we mean by results.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Notre Dame de Grace (NDG) is a neighbourhood of Montreal situated west of downtown. 60,000 people live in an area of 8.8 square kilometres. It is very diverse both economically and culturally.

The **NDG Community Council** (the Council) was founded in 1942, which makes it one of the oldest organisations of its kind in Canada. It aims to inform, involve and act with local residents, organisations and institutions to improve the quality of life in NDG. As a local co-ordinating body committed to promoting social change, the council (through its committees and with its partners) organises and supports projects in response to needs and strengths that arise in the community.

The neighbourhood has a reputation as one with a high level of citizen involvement. For this reason the Council was approached by a private foundation interested in exploring citizen engagement. Talks led to the launching in 1997 of a 3 year research action project – the **Citizen Engagement Initiative (CEI)**. Through its community development work the CEI hopes to learn about factors that facilitate or impede citizen engagement.

The goals of the CEI are to

explore and identify skills, strengths and assets in NDG
enrich and develop these skills, strengths and assets
encourage and facilitate community involvement
create new links in the community

The structure of the CEI.

The CEI is directed by an Advisory Committee (AC), consisting of 12 volunteers and the *ex officio* coordinator of the Project. The work of the project is carried out by working groups and committees, roughly one for each project goal. All groups are linked to the Advisory Committee.

All strategic decisions are made by the Advisory Committee. There has never been an executive, so it is indeed the Advisory Committee that steers and owns the project. The Advisory Committee is linked to the Community Council through its chair who sits on the Board of the Council. As well the project coordinator reports to council staff and at monthly community Forums which are organized jointly by the Council and the CLSC “NDG/2000”.

The working committees are as follows:

The Mapping committee was formed to develop a profile of individual and collective engagement in the community and to study factors of engagement. Methods used to study individual engagement included focus groups' ("Kitchen meetings"), in-depth interviews of community leaders and a telephone survey of individuals. Collective engagement was approached through a survey of organizations and an analysis of all events in the community over a calendar year ("media project").

The Community action and leadership committee (CA&L) has been promoting various teaching activities to enhance leadership capacity in the community. It is interesting to note that efforts to define leadership in the community have still not achieved consensus.

The Support Program Working Group launched and supported two generations of new initiatives in NDG. Twenty three projects have been supported so far (see appendix 1). Through small grants, coaching and other forms of support the CEI has been able to stimulate engagement and to enhance links while studying the process of engagement.

Communication was done by ad hoc groups that would get together around specific tasks.

The Evaluation and Planning Working Group was formed during the participatory evaluation process. This group transformed the evaluation results into an action plan and prepared the monitoring plan for the project. It now has the mandate to monitor the project until its end in March 2000.

The Staff consists of a full time coordinator and the equivalent of a second person. During the one and a half years of intensive mapping activities the second staff person was a mapping coordinator. Currently, several part-time contractual collaborators are engaged by the CEI, each performing a well-defined task.

This project is really run by volunteers with the support of the staff. There are approximately 40 committed volunteers. It functions in a collegial manner - all decisions and work happen in a group.

OUR APPROACH TO RESULTS

The notion of "results" and their measurement was a challenge for this project, given its very broad scope and its time constraints. Attempts were made to identify and measure quantifiable social indicators of engagement in a pre- and post- project time frame. However, there was general agreement that isolating the impact of the CEI on these indicators was well nigh impossible. The AC came to understand that the process of engagement is as valuable to a community in the long run as are measurable outcomes.

The "results" of our project were thus defined as:

- the data about the community gathered in the mapping process,
- our learning about factors that facilitate or impede engagement
- the expansion and diversification of the leadership base in the community
- improvement in the skill level of engaged citizens as a result of our activities;
- increased availability and use of resources for community leadership training.
- the links between groups and the collaborative actions resulting from the project that will be of ongoing benefit to the life of the community.
- the structures and resources that will remain in the community once the project has ended.

THE CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION

Evaluation involving an external evaluator was a requirement of the Foundation at the time of grant approval. The Board of Directors of the Council selected a participatory evaluation rather than a traditional one in its original proposal. The Foundation agreed but decided it did not wish to participate in the process. The CEI thus knew from the very beginning that an evaluation had to be done and negotiated to carry it out at the half-way point, i.e. following the completion of the mapping process.

From the very beginning of the CEI a strong notion of monitoring and evaluation has been present. Internal evaluation has been an ongoing process. For example, an activity report has been prepared for every (monthly) meeting of the AC, and feedback from participants in CEI activities has been consistently sought. The Advisory Committee and working groups performed various types of self evaluation.

Further favorable circumstances included the fact that the Community Action & Leadership Committee had developed outcomes and indicators for its work as early as October 98. As well the previous knowledge and experience with evaluation of several volunteers and staff was important in planning and implementing the evaluation.

Flow of the process

The Citizen Engagement Initiative did its Participatory Evaluation in several stages. For the sake of understanding the calendar of this evaluation, we are dividing the process into preparatory, actual evaluation and follow up stages. It should be clear, however, that we consider evaluation to be a continuing process.

Preparatory stage (January –November 98)

It is really difficult to define the “beginning”. Formal preparation lasted from January 98 when the self-evaluation of the Advisory Committee was done, to November 98 when the process was accepted by the Advisory Committee (AC).

Activities included:

1. Ongoing discussions about the concept and timing of an evaluation;
2. The self-evaluation of the AC in January 1998. During this one-day evaluation exercise with an outside facilitator the vision, goals, and structure of the CEI were revisited.
3. The definition of engagement for the purposes of this project in a series of exercises of the Advisory Committee (Appendix 2)
4. Several staff members and volunteers took courses on participatory evaluation during spring – summer 98.
5. The CEI coordinator selected and summarized the theoretical framework of the PE based upon several sources of literature (United Nations Development Program, World Bank, Université de Montreal); The initial document was condensed at the request of the AC.
6. The Chair of the AC and the coordinator received a mandate to look for the external facilitator. This search included the development of terms of reference for a facilitator. Defining the terms of reference obliged the CEI to clearly define what was planned and the time frame;
7. Definition of the goals of the evaluation. These were defined by the Advisory Committee following a set of consultations with working groups and committees.

The work in this stage provided us with a theoretical model and the goals of our evaluation. This was not always a smooth process. We used material on participatory evaluation from courses at the Institute for Management and Community Development of Concordia University, the *Centre de Formation Populaire* in Montreal, and the University of Montreal. We relied particularly on material developed by the World Bank.

We started with a definition from the World Bank document (see Sources:5) “Participatory monitoring and evaluation is a process of collaborative problem-solving through the generation and use of knowledge. It is a process that leads to corrective action by involving all levels of stakeholders in shared decision-making.”

Although we were initially interested in evaluating both process and results, more focus was actually placed on process. When outcomes were addressed, they sometimes needed redefinition.

During this period the challenge was to develop a collective understanding and acceptance of the participatory evaluation process. The theoretical model was new to most and several concerns were expressed. Would it divert us from moving forward with the “real work”? Would it be superficial, lacking in rigor and too soft (i.e. not quantitative enough?) Was it just too complicated?

Considerable time was spent discussing the importance of honesty and openness. The first evaluation exercise in January '98 had helped to overcome some discomfort with risking in that area.

Concerns about relevance were addressed by dovetailing the evaluation process to the development of an on-going action plan for the project. This was a key factor for several members who were reluctant to embark on what seemed a cumbersome process.

Concerns about time and complexity were very real obstacles for many volunteers. These were addressed by constant adaptation of the process to fit our realities. Theoretical material was condensed to its simplest level. Training periods were shortened and time periods were extended. In the end participants did successfully understand and accept the concepts and ensuing steps.

Another obstacle at this stage was to find a bilingual external facilitator whose availability matched our requirements. This again caused a delay in the onset of the evaluation, even though this allowed for consolidation of understanding of the process.

Finally the need for delegating to an evaluation committee at this stage was not unanimously accepted by the Advisory Committee. This left the coordinator and chair of the CEI as a de facto evaluating committee, which meant increased work for them with a certain discomfort about engagement levels of the members.

By fall '98 the stage was set, and we moved forward with the following GOALS FOR EVALUATION:

- to develop a collective critical appreciation of progress to date,
- to provide the basis for moving the CEI from its initial exploratory phase to a phase of concrete and concerted actions promoting citizen engagement.

Evaluation process (November 98 to February 99)

Steps included:

- 1: Reflection on overall evaluation questions and process
- 2: Stocktaking by each project working group and committee
- 3: Stakeholder's Forum: Collective reflection
- 4: Formation of the Evaluation and Planning Working Group
- 5: Preparation of action plans by each working group and committee
6. Preparation of the CEI Action Plan

This was a period of intense activity for the participants as the Advisory Committee and all work groups developed evaluation questions, decided on a process, prepared for a stakeholders forum, and worked on action plans. Again, time was a constraint, especially as the Christmas holidays approached. Holding our Stakeholders' Forum in mid January very likely cost us some participation, although 31 of 40 invited volunteers did commit to at least one of the two evenings (with 25 per evening). This was in addition to at least 16 working meetings before and after the Forum.

At this stage it was obvious that working groups were approaching the evaluation from various positions and with different expectations. Some were focussed on outcomes while others were focussed on process. To ensure the comparability of activities done by various committees a guideline for their evaluation was prepared.

Stakeholders were defined as all current and former participants of committees and working groups of the CEI, members of the board of directors of the NDG Community Council, and some interested members of the community. Stakeholders participated in different ways. Some were present for the whole process while others limited their participation to the small groups or to the Forum.

Participants of the Stakeholders' Forum thus included a mix of those deeply involved in one or several parts of the CEI, those who had participated in the defining of the project for the Community Council and those who were interested in applying the results of the project in NDG.

The Evaluation and Planning working group was founded on a constituency basis, to ensure a voice for all parts of the project.

Given the constraints of time and the focus on question development in the PE model, some participants felt a gap existed in this stage. More rigorous stocktaking in small groups, and prioritization of evaluation questions for the project as a whole might have satisfied this frustration. It is worth noting that almost all questions did get addressed in the final action plan but this was obscured during the middle phase.

The very dynamic Stakeholder's Forum afforded an opportunity for participants to grasp the scope of the CEI project as a whole and, for some, to better understand its links to the Council. Several issues were clearly identified for future attention: 1) sustainability for citizens involvement, 2) communications, both internal and external; 3) structures needed to support and enhance interactions, and 4) realism in terms of workload.

Working groups then were able to develop their action plan for the remainder of the project. These were compiled into the overall **CEI Action Plan**. This comprehensive document, addressing activities in all sectors of the project and the key issues identified during the evaluation, was the major outcome of this phase. The action plan was done in the form of a table, with an attached calendar of decisions to be taken by the Advisory Committee. A prose description was later added.

THE CEI ACTION PACKAGES ARE:

I Marketing and communication,

1. overall marketing and communication,
2. internet project
3. communication of mapping results
4. communication of other activities of the CEI

II Encourage, support and facilitate citizens' involvement

5. Skills bank
6. Resource centre for Citizen's Engagement
7. Support program for new citizens' initiatives
8. Research on engagement in the community through analysis of experience of new initiatives supported by the CEI
9. Support program for new initiatives: the third generation of projects

III Mapping actions

10. preparation for the second round of surveys

IV Enriching and developing capacity for community action and leadership

11. Community learning: general

12. Community learning: Partnership with the Concordia Institute for Management and Community Development (Summer Program)

13. Community learning: Learning circles

14. Identification of the ongoing community needs for learning

The calendar of decisions left an opportunity for the Advisory Committee to analyse and prepare proposals for several explored issues, and to then decide whether or not to proceed. For example, the skills bank idea was dropped in June '99, the plan for a resource centre for engagement was adopted in September '99 and a third generation of projects was launched in October '99.

Follow up (March 99 to the end of the Project)

Activities include:

1. Preparation of the Outcome Monitoring Plan
2. Adoption of the Plan by the Advisory Committee
3. Providing the Evaluation and Planning Working Group (EPWG) with a mandate to perform monitoring of the project
4. Carrying out and adjusting the Action Plan by the Advisory Committee
5. Ongoing monitoring
6. Final Report

Once the action plan including the calendar of decisions to be taken was adopted in February of 1999, the EPWG developed the **CEI Ongoing Monitoring Plan**.

The Monitoring Plan was developed to ensure that the main issues identified by the stakeholders in the evaluation process be tackled. Thus the main components of the Monitoring plan are the outcomes to be measured, the indicators to be used to measure them, and the operational requirements for the measurement process. The EPWG proposed and the Advisory Committee adopted a Monitoring plan consisting of three sets of outcomes in relation to project goals:

1. Overall indicators of civic participation in NDG
2. Capacity building for community action and leadership
3. Links and relationships.

At the same time as accepting the Monitoring plan, the Advisory Committee provided the EPWG with the mandate to carry out the Monitoring of the Project until its end.

CONCLUSIONS

This participatory evaluation was an effective tool to accomplish our main goal, i.e. a review of where we were, a consensus on future directions, and a plan of action taking our available resources into account. It also turned out to be another tool to explore and strengthen citizen engagement in our community.

The evaluation brought additional benefits. It was an excellent team –building exercise. It enabled all participants (stakeholders) to appreciate the scope of the whole project and to place the CEI in its organizational context. It identified the expectations of stakeholders and areas that needed strengthening and change. The open atmosphere allowed for some painful self-examination and re-definition of outcomes in parts of the project. This served as a validation of the project and demonstrated the strong commitment of its participants.

On the other hand, we learned that carrying out a participatory evaluation in a volunteer based community project poses many challenges. In retrospect, the thorough preparation was essential to our success in analyzing where we wanted to go. But the process was very time consuming and somewhat cumbersome. It involved more than 16 group meetings, and numerous one-to-one discussions, preparatory efforts,

communication of comments, clarifications and answering of questions. If we calculate only the working groups and Advisory committee meetings, 352 volunteer man-hours (or a total of 430.6 man-hours including staff) were invested in the PE.

Initial concern that the process and quality would be compromised due to lack of time were not borne out. People did give enough time and attention to master and carry out the evaluation. However, some parts of the project expressed real frustration as their ongoing work was put on hold.

Were the benefits of the evaluation outcomes worth the costs in time, money and focus? Could we have developed our action plan in a democratic way without following all the steps of the participatory evaluation model? We are not yet in a position to conclude one way or another.

SOURCES USED TO DEVELOP OUR MODEL

1. Bilodeau, Henriette, Denis Jean-Louis: Evaluation of health programmes (Evaluation des programmes de santé) (teaching material) ASA 6054, autumn semester, 1993, University of Montreal .
2. Coupal Françoise, Gilles, Anne: Who are Question makers? (teaching material) Session 39, Summer Program 1998, Institute for Management and Community Development, Concordia University;
3. Gervais, Lise and Vanier, Carole: Evaluation Participative (teaching material), Session 38 Summer Program 1998, Institute for Management and Community Development, Concordia University;
4. Gervais, Lise and Vanier, Carole: L'Evaluation participative des services sur mesure, (teaching material) October, 1998 Centre de formation populaire, Montreal;
5. Our external facilitator, Natalie Kishchuk, was invaluable in helping put final form to the model we followed.
6. Rietebergen-McCracken, Jennifer and Narayan, Deepa (Compiled) Participatory Tools and Evaluation, Module VI: Participatory Tools and Techniques: A Resource Kit for Participation and Social Assessment, World Bank, Social Policy and Resettlement Division, Environmental Department, 1998 (received via the Coupal & Gilles course);
7. UNDP Office of Evaluation and Strategic Planning (OESP): Who are the Question Makers; A Participatory Evaluation Handbook, UNDP, New York, 1997;

**Projet d'engagement communautaire /Citizen Engagement Initiative
(PÈC/CEI)**

**Support Program / Programme de soutien
Summary of Projects/ Sommaire des projets**

1. Centre de Femmes Musulmanes

A resource service for Muslim women that will, it is intended, expand over time to become a centre.

Contact people: Rabia Ourti, Fatima Hosni, Sofia El-Awad

2. Carib Times

A monthly newsletter for people of Caribbean origin that would serve to inform and link readers.

Contact people: Tony Jones, Prince Herriman, Colin Camberbath

3. Mind Your Own Business! A “cinq-à-sept” for home-based business people in NDG that aims to build a network and share knowledge and resources.

Contact people: Denise Guilbert 484-1221, Jennifer Morrison, Martha Smith;

4. Project Link

An effort that aims to link and support Filipino workers and their families (esp. domestic or factory workers) through a series of forums, workshops and cultural nights.

Contact people: Elaine Uy, Thelma Castro, Lita Martinez

5. The Environment and NDG

An effort to identify and publicize environmentally friendly businesses in NDG so that consumers can make better choices in their buying habits.

Contact people: Issac Judah 485 4570, Wendy Gluchinsky 485 1279, Helen Papazian

6. Reminiscences - writers on the storm

Publication of poetry and stories about the NDG community by local writers.

Contact people: Gilles Chaisson, Grace Moore, George Apostolatos

7. Study Circle on Environmental Links to Cancer and Other Illnesses

A series of study circles aimed at gathering interested people and engaging in self-education around the issue of cancer, illness and the environment.

Contact people: Renée McGilly, Stephanie Dunn, Lanie Melamed

8. Summer '98 Animation Program at the Habitation Communautaire (HC) NDG

A series of activities for children living in the HCNDG aimed at building links and connections.

Contact people: Sharon Johnson, Tracy Biddle, Alison Apple

9. Kiddies Carnival

A group that will make costumes for children living on Walkley St. so that they may participate in community events such as the Walkley Street Festival.

Contact people: Judith Antoine , Cheryl Blacklette, Ingrid Dobson, June McGibbon

End.

Note: Please contact the Citizen Engagement Initiative (CEI) at 484 5235

Pour plus d'informations veuillez appeler le **Projet d'engagement communautaire** (PEC) au 484 5235

1. UNITY IN STRUGGLE

A weekend of cultural exchange between different ethnic and cultural communities to help break down existing barriers and create solid working links.

2. CELEBRATION OF WEST INDIAN WOMEN

Cultural activity in celebration of the ethnic heritage of West Indian women in NDG designed to bridge the gaps and create links between communities.

3. .MULTIETHNIC INTEGRATION

A pilot study on the role of community organizations in helping refugees and immigrants integrate into NDG society at the neighborhood level.

4. NDG RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND REFUGEES

A survey of the different types of involvement with refugees and immigrants by religious institutions in NDG.

5 FAIR TRADE COFFEE HOUSE

A public event timed with Ten Days of Global Justice, an ecumenical initiative designed to make people aware of the impact of global economic trends and bring them together.

6.PROJECT INQUIRER

This project is aimed at using surveys and workshops to establish the specific conditions and real needs of domestic workers.

7. WOMEN AWARE

Develop an info -booklet and incorporate the group. Aware is a mutual aid / advocacy group for women who are (or have been) victims of conjugal violence.

8. PROJECT ECHO

A resource service and workshops for Filipino women who are domestic and service workers. A bulletin will be issued to create links within this ethnic community

9. FOOD BANK PLAYERS

Documentation by filming of educational dramas involving the community and the filming of NDG Community Council engagement activities

10. THE NDG COOP PLAYERS

A co-operative playgroup that provides a safe and fun environment for local parents and their children.

11. THE GAME ROOM

A game-oriented program centered in the community room of the Claude-de-Maestral public housing building in NDG and designed to foster harmony between adults and young people.

12. CULTURAL INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTION

Enabling the interaction of children with seniors and parents in order to educate them about intergenerational links and values.

13. HEAL

Study problems in the environment that relate to the increasing number of illnesses experiences by the local population. Advocacy on the issues. Popular education method will be used, and a reach out-strategy is explored as well s links established with the relevant existing groups.

Appendix 2: Engagement - as defined for the CEI by its Advisory Committee in 1998

“Engagement” and the CEI

There are many ways in which individuals, groups, organizations and associations can contribute to their community/ies. Involvement can happen in many ways and at many different levels. It includes an individual who gives money to a cause or organization s/he believes in. It includes the person who contributes their time and energy in some way – like, for example, a baker who donates cookies to a bake sale. Involvement can also take the form of participating in an effort that brings several or many people together with the goal of working towards improving an aspect of the community. Finally, involvement can include collective action that aims at social, political or economic change.

By contributing at any level to the community, citizens are making an important investment in the people, associations and infrastructures around them. However, given the four levels outlined above, two kinds of engagement can be identified for the purposes of our project. In the first case, an individual who donates money might not be considered *engaged* through that act alone, but the actions of many such individuals represent a *collective engagement*. On the other hand, an individual, association or business involved and committed to a group or cause may be considered engaged on an individual level. Both collective and individual engagement is important for healthy communities.

In order for people to contribute to their community/ies and for engagement to occur, several basic conditions must exist and be nourished through key mechanisms and tools. Some of these conditions include freedom and a healthy democracy where people can contribute to meaningful change. They also include systems – like public transportation and communications – that are affordable and accessible. In order to foster engagement, there must also exist a dynamic and rich skills-base among the members of the community. This includes people who are effective communicators, who are good at linking and connecting people, who are effective organizers and who are informed.

The Citizen Engagement Initiative is a project that seeks to engage the community as a whole and to engage individuals within our community. It will therefore develop and facilitate the conditions and tools for involvement through efforts like a communications campaign, leadership training and mapping. It will also support and initiate actions by citizens groups and associations and/or facilitate involvement and engagement.