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a difference

Building and Sustaining a Community Research Project

science & innovation
Department:
Science and Innovation
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HSRC
Human Sciences
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HSRC Sweetwaters in a glance!

Sweetwater site is situated in the middle of rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

- Former homelands,

- Majority black population

- Governed by traditional leaders (Amakhosi),

- Sweetwater is located 14 km from the city,

- Limited service provision and high unemployment rates,

- Poor education levels, a youthful population profile, and limited job opportunities.

- Residents with employment travel to low-income jobs in the cities and nearby towns, and small-scale commercial and subsistence farming supports the area's food security.

Community Involvement

- Building and sustaining Community-based research programs depend on engaging and involving the community members from the onset.

- This creates a space for empowerment, allowing them to develop personal agency via participation in overcoming issues affecting their lives.

- Community involvement contributes significantly to developing a shared community identity, a sense of belonging meaningfully to a larger, engaged collective.

However, involving the community has challenges, too.

For example, the assumption is made that community members will mobilise around a common concern, but this concern might differ between groups within communities and from the **research agenda**.

Community Engagement (CE) Framework

- CE framework consists of four components/phases: "range", "recognise", "recruit", and "retain/sustain".

- This framework can be used in research with various study designs (e.g., randomised control trial and cross-sectional study design).

Range

This component/phase deals with scoping potential communities in which to conduct the study.

- Community background,
- key historical events,
- and any previous research experience, which could influence participation.

- Review statistics (e.g., number and types of households and number and age of the people within an area).
- Use GIS mapping of key resources, buildings, and service sites to determine the location, boundaries, and actual size of communities; etc.

Observational exercises

– to learn about household structures,

– public transport,

and other community characteristics provide knowledge crucial for recruiting community members.

Recognize

The second component/phase entails recognising or identifying community leaders and stakeholders, networks, decision-makers, and influencers in the target community.

This phase aims to obtain buy-in and secure endorsement for the study and to form coalitions with community partners, which could aid the research process.

Church leaders, local government departments, and leaders of community-based organisations are also engaged through existing community structures.

Researchers collect information through stakeholder inventories and **baseline ethnographies** to identify key individuals and their roles in the community relating to the research.

Researchers also established a **community advisory board** (CAB) to consult with at various points.

This is a well-known practice in community-based research, community development, and community building.

The CAB formalises the research community partnership, provides a structure to voice concerns and priorities, and ensures community participation throughout the research process.

Recruit

The third component/phase entails reaching particular groups in the community that are especially relevant to the research project.

Community Mobilization (CM) strategies are tailored to particular target groups.

Community outreach teams, researchers, and CAB members design recruitment strategies jointly.

Researchers identify potential barriers to participation and draw on community members' knowledge of local norms and cultures, including what would interest particular target groups and how to encourage participation.

Group-based information-sharing sessions events

Approach community members in key areas such as:

- local business spots,

- tuck shops,

- bus and minibus taxi terminals, and

- busy road intersections and share information

- – Use media (the local radio station) and social media (mobile texts) to recruit participants.
- – Men's gatherings (Izimbizos) were also held as it was observed that men in the area are generally more reticent to participate.

Retain or sustain

The last component/phase of the framework involves retaining community participants in the study and sustaining long-term relationships with stakeholders,

Developing and sustaining mutual collaboration and acknowledging the **benefits** for researchers, participants, and the broader community.

At the heart of retention is ensuring that project staff members observe good ethical practices, such as confidentiality and anonymity, respectful interactions, and providing regular feedback.

Relationships are also maintained through the CAB structure via regular communication, feedback sessions and consultations, and attending community stakeholder meetings organised by other structures.

Results dissemination

Results dissemination places value on sustaining long-term relationships with various stakeholders.

Returning research results is integral to sustaining research programs in the community.

Results Dissemination Committee is formed, responsible for designing and executing the dissemination strategy.

Conclusion

The attitude of valuing community partnerships ensures the agency and involvement of community members in public health care, shifting their identity beyond study participants to key **action players** in research.